



THE CAINE
PLANTATION

The Next Quilt is Red

Karine Green

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THE CAINE PLANTATION: THE NEXT QUILT IS RED

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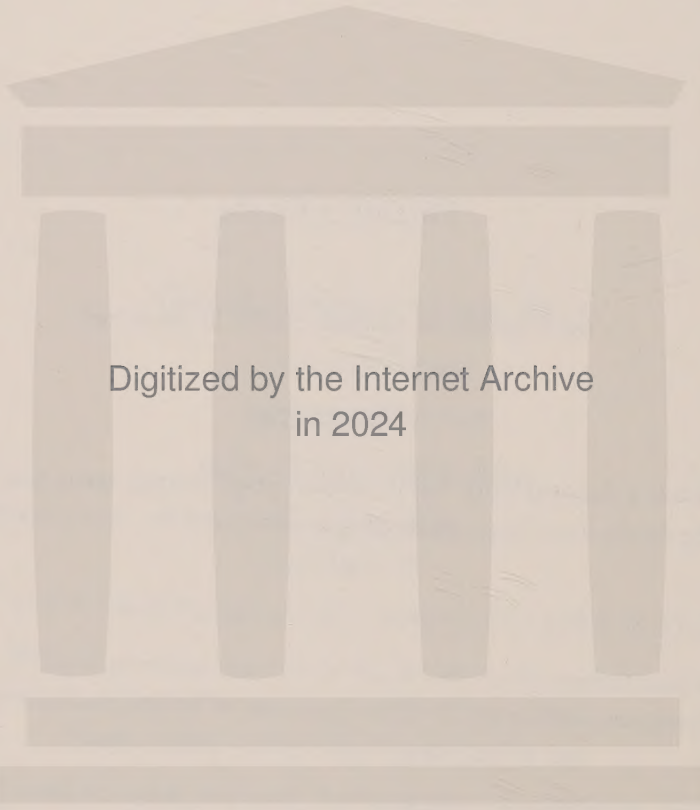
This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, living or dead is a coincidence. This is a complete fabrication of the author's imagination, along with liberal use of literary license. The inspiration comes from a childhood fear my son had of the closet, a criminal history report I wrote in college, and an abandoned mansion down the street. It burned down long ago

DEDICATION

To those whose sacrifice cannot be measured

WARNING

This is a fictional story, but it contains graphic crime scene descriptions
with adult situations.



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CONTENTS

Prologue	August 1846	1
1	Dark Lady's Message	9
2	The Next Quilt is Red	44
3	The Razor Whip	56
4	The Bygone Secrets of The Caine Plantation	72
5	Where is the Red Quilt	99
6	Louise Caine-Mathews	120
7	The Randy Bell Incident	138
8	A Conspiracy of Opportunity	153
9	Dark Lady's Warning	165
10	For You on Your Special Day	181
11	Sheriff Rainier's Break in the Case	202
12	The Angry One	223
Epilogue	Six Years Later at the Caine Plantation	273

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND AUTHOR NOTES

I would like to welcome everyone to this work of fiction. It covers some deep historical aspects of a not-so-simple time in our history, but is not meant to be a historical book. This story is comprised of local legends, personal conversation, and family rumors of people I have met in travels of my life, so there is no historical research to support these local word of mouth stories and innuendos. They are simply the inspiration for the story.

Not all of the people/legends are from the same town and state. It is not my intent to glamorize or villianize places or family names unjustly. This is a fantasy inspired by a maddening bit of research that I found about the quilt theory being bogus. It was the presentation of the research, not necessarily the truthfulness of it that I found objectionable (you'll read my thoughts on the matter in some dialogue between the Kathy and the Chief of Police.)

The intent here is simply entertain you with a place that has such a vast and enthralling history that it calls for stories to be written about it.

Hopefully you will be inspired to learn more about some of the issues addressed in the story. If you would some excellent views on the Underground Railroad and how it worked (for real and not through legend) this is the most interesting site I have found.

<http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews11.shtml> There are of course other sites, but this one seemed to approach the issue from a firm standing in reality.

The only *real* research is the Dred Scott Act, and the follow up Supreme Court Decision that ordered U.S. Marshalls to enforce it. <http://www.thedredscottfoundation.org/thechronology.html> This is a quick read. As with any fabricated story I have cherry picked only the bits related to move the story forward. It is not my intention to leave off any important facts in our Nation's history or show disrespect by not including pages and pages of Kathy's thoughts and notes on the Dred Scott Act. I write this paragraph because it was the first thing the initial editors and reviews mentioned.

The rest of '*the research*' used by Kathy is made up to support the fictional town and its fictional residents, including the Caine's. Their name is chosen because it is a sugar cane plantation. I considered a recommended reading section, but honestly there are so many great websites and books out that I felt bad picking and choosing amongst them.

I will type up an afterward to explain where and how I heard the rumor that was behind the inspiration for the monstrous behavior of Percy Caine (It is a law enforcement rumor that was passed around officer to officer. To explain it now would spoil half of the story.)

Please enjoy this fictional tale of murder treachery and the
Underground Railroad.

PROLOGUE

The Caine Plantation: August 1846;

Mary was still dressed in her Sunday best, a white rosebud dress, with her beloved Mistress' careworn petticoats under it. Under any other circumstance she knew she looked very pretty in it, but she had been chained to the whipping post in the stable last night. She had been every night since Mistress Marissa had died two weeks ago. The dress was no longer pretty, it was dirty and smelled.

Last night had been different, Master's son, Percy had handled her even harsher than he ever had before. Her mind was still reeling from the severity of the beating; he had never been that cruel. He had taken the time to make sure she could not sit down. She had to stand all night, or hang by the iron collar around her neck. Her feet and legs had developed a severe ache in them. She had overheard Master William ask Percy if he had been able to purchase that horrible razor whip from Blanc. William's eyes were normally cold and hard, but there was now something in them that looked broken. Because of this, she was certain she was going to die today.

Mary was all too familiar with the name Blanc. He was the owner of another nearby sugar cane plantation. He was almost as miserable to deal with as the Caine's were. Mary hated both of them; better yet, all of them. She had tried to do her best to keep her heart guarded from hatred, but it was a daily struggle that she was losing, especially now that her Mistress was gone.

It was hot and steamy already. She looked around the stable. It was impeccably kept. The stalls and gear perfectly cared for. This was her little grandson's domain. He cared for the Caine's eight horses, although the stable would hold twelve. The empty stalls were used for guest's horses. He had let the horses out to pasture, except Percy's gray mare. Normally the stable doors were open, but today they were shut tight, locking her in.

She reminded herself of her true name, the one she gave herself, Dark Lady. At first it had been a code name to help hide her identity off the Plantation, but the field hands had also started calling her Dark Lady. Not long after, everyone had taken to calling her Dark Lady for another reason. It was a coincidence that caused a terrible delay while she and Marissa waited to see if their cover had been blown. It wasn't, but just in case danger was getting close, they had started using different quilts to communicate with the Rainier and Blanc slaves in their network.

Dark Lady was a more appropriate name for her than the one Master William forced on her. To be honest, she was the real lady in charge of this home. Not that anyone except Mistress would have ever admitted to it, especially once Mistress Marissa had decided to concentrate on all her extra-curricular activities. It was only fitting that her *chosen* name has the title 'Lady' in it.

She had truly loved Marissa. Her grief at the loss of her only true friend was overwhelming. Somehow she had to make them pay for what they were doing, for what they had done. And not just for how they treated her, but Marissa as well. They had caused all this trouble. Their evil was so desperate that only the most severe punishment could possibly bring justice. She felt a bitterness rise in her that was so sinful she could feel it scarring the very essence of her soul.

She tried to push the dark thoughts away from her, as she swayed back and forth, chanting the Lord's Prayer, but the clanking of her iron chains brought up a whole new wave of feelings. Unforgiveness, bitterness, shame, guilt, and loathing, began to overwhelm her, and that was before the physical pain could even be felt. All the negative emotion that a human being could experience seemed to be taking over her body. They had taken too much, crossed too many lines. Hatred filled her, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

It was not right that she had been subjected to so much pain and anguish in this life. The white-folks believed things about her, and there was nothing she could say or do to make them understand what had actually happened. It was all so unjust. In fact, everything in her life had been unjust, starting with being abducted from her village in Africa when she was just ten. She thought she had been lucky to survive the voyage here, but she now questioned that, perhaps she had actually been one of the unlucky ones who lived.

Her thoughts shifted as Master William and his son, Percy, entered the stable. She knew it was them because the gray horse whinnied at Percy's appearance. The mare always did when he entered. Dark Lady assumed the beast could sense evil, and was crying for the loss of the good soul that had once inhabited her Mistress' happy little boy. Percy had become more and more deviant as he had grown. He was so full of spite that Dark Lady would not have recognized him as Marissa's son at all, if she had not watched him grow up with her own eyes.

Her little grandson, Stable Boy, was hiding amongst the hay bales in the upper loft. She hoped he would stay up there, out of the way of whatever was about to happen. She had tried to order him to go to her sister's cabin, but he wouldn't leave her. She understood his loyalty, he was more like her son than a grandson, because his mother had passed on when he was born, and his father had died later the same year of influenza. It grieved her that he was disobeying her now. He did not need to be here to be subjected to this. The thought of how it would affect him over the long term cut even deeper into her soul.

Last night she had intended to have one of the field hands take Stable Boy to her sister, and then force him to stay there. She never got the chance to leave the house, or even get a message to one of them. Before she even realized it, she found that a lone tear had escaped her eye. It galled her to have the tear escape in front of that evil bastard, and his demon seed.

Another sign that they intended to kill her was that none of the other slaves had been called to witness the whipping. There was no spectacle being made, meaning, William was at a loss for words. He was out of self-control. With no one around, he could engage in his carnage without the threat of a slave uprising. Why hadn't she seen this coming, and taken

Stable Boy to safety earlier? Why did she so foolishly think that they had some sort of loyalty toward her for all the hard work she had done for them over the years. Sadly, it had only been Marissa who had ever shown her any sort of genuine friendship over the years.

William Caine wrung his hands around the handle of his whip. This one was unlike any of others he owned. It was a cat-o-nine tails with sharpened arrowheads attached at the end of each tail that was branching off the whip. He had bought the whip special just for this occasion.

"Surh, I's would never hurt hur," Dark Lady said, trying to sound as slavish as she could. Marissa had taught her better, but right now, she would beg if she had to. If nothing else, to stop Stable Boy from seeing what she was sure was about to happen.

"Really?" William said, allowing the words to droll out of his mouth. She was surprised at the sound of his voice, he didn't sound like himself at all.

Dark Lady could hear the leather of the whip as he was wringing it in his hands. She knew it was a quiet sound, but right now it sounded so loud. She knew if she lived through this, she would never be able to hear leather against leather again without thinking of that whip.

His son Percy, started giggling like the idiot he was. Oh how she hated him! Why couldn't he have died of the flu like her son had? Or better yet, she could imagine one of his criminal cohorts could have killed him, leaving his carcass for those hellish bayou beasts to eat. How could her kind Mistress have raised such a monster? If she hadn't personally been present at Percy's birth, she would have doubted that he was from her loins at all.

She drew in what she was sure would be her last easy breath. She wanted to yell at him to get it over with. The only thing that stopped her was the uncertainty she still had about the death of her Mistress. Had she accidentally killed Marissa? Percy had told her that she had poisoned Mistress with bad food. She didn't think so. She was an expert in the kitchen. She knew that people came from miles away to eat her food off of the Caine's dinner table. Who knew how many business opportunities she had opened for them by satisfying the hunger pains of the Caine's rich and powerful guests? Never, in all her days had her cooking caused anyone to

walk away from her table sick, let alone become deathly ill.

She was sure it was a lie, it had to be. And if it was true, why couldn't it have been Percy who had died? For that matter, if the food was bad, why didn't more people die, or at least get sick? It was true, it had been an individual meal for Marissa, but the white folks were fools if they thought the kitchen slaves didn't eat the same food. They were slaves, but they were not stupid, and certainly not hungry.

May their business be cursed for how they treated their wife and mother, after all, she had been beaten no differently than the slaves had been. The only difference had been that William had used his fists, and not a whip. Only once during her time at the plantation, had she begged for him to stop beating his wife. Instead he had whipped Dark Lady for intervening, and then had mercilessly beaten her with the butt of his pistol. She had a permanent gouge on the top of her head to show for it—as well as two deep scars on her shoulder from the incident. Nine months after that horrifying night, her own son had been born.

William pulled a *William Shakespeare; Primary Reader for School Children* out of his coat pocket, and tossed the book on the ground in front of her.

"Mary, I think you can talk like the education I know you have. That is what you meant by the fact that my wife was good to you, isn't it? Oh yes...I know it all. I know that she taught you how to read, how to speak, how to carry yourself. It was you who corrupted my sweet, kind wife in every way possible. You are the one who convinced her to go against her own interest. You had her violate the law by teaching you to read, and I am sure do accounting for the plantation books. And you repay her by killing her with sickness, and treachery." His voice was uncharacteristically calm and smooth. Normally, he was a yeller and screamer when he was angry. In fact, she was sure when he was riled up, the Blanc's could probably hear him, some twenty miles away, but right now he used the same tone of voice he might use to discuss something that bored him.

Dark Lady glared at him, "I did not kill Marissa! She was my only hope. Please, understand. It doesn't make sense that I would harm one hair on her head!" She was quite certain there would be no escape from this. She had a bungling idiot for a master, who had an even bigger, bungling idiot for a

son, and that was that.

William smirked, "You ran your runaways through my property, using my poor, frail wife as cover for your operation."

"No," Dark Lady shook her head. "That's no' true." She would not confirm to either of them that it had been Mistress. It would put a quick stop to the other white folks from being able to work the network that was already in place. Her dying words had to be denial of the plantation's railroad, as some had taken to calling it, to freedom. She knew someone would take over for her when she was gone. Someone would continue the work of freeing her people. In fact, there would be a lot of people stepping up, as long as they knew they weren't exposed by Dark Lady. The network must be kept whole, the tracks for the train were laid and she would not be the one who pulled them up. She would willingly, no happily burn in Hell first.

"Oh , I am afraid, it is very true. You ran this operation through here with the precision of an espionage agency. However, I can say that Percy here appreciates your contribution to the Caine fortune. You see, once I cracked your code, you lost control of your operation. The most amusing part is that you didn't even know it. He was stealing them from other plantations to help supplement another little side business. You made it so easy, it was almost ridiculous." Again, his voice had that same frightening, dead calm to it.

Percy cackled out, his stupid giggle, and in a mocking tone, said, "Well, it would appear that the Dark Lady is well in control of embracing the security of her post." He leaned in close to her. "I want you to know I have special plans for your runaway friends. They will never see what you promised them." He licked her ear, and giggled again as he backed off.

Dark Lady started to say something, but the sharp edges of the whip came down hard on her back. She had been steadfast in her mind not to scream, but the level of pain both psychologically and physically was so unexpected that the scream defied her will and escaped on its own. Through the pain the thoughts ate away at what little strength remained. What had she done to her people? What was Percy going to do to them?

She could hear Stable Boy crying. He ran out and picked up the *Shakespeare Reader*.

"No, Stable, go back! Find your auntie, and stay with her," Dark Lady whimpered, trying but failing to keep a steady voice.

"Back, Boy!" Percy smacked Stable Boy hard with the back-end of his horse whip, striking him smartly across the face. The blow caught him off guard and he fell back so hard that his feet were lifted clean off the ground. The side of his head hit hard on one of the step stools near Percy's mare. He lay there limp with his eyes staring coldly at Dark Lady. His death had been instantaneous.

"This Dark Lady will curse you and your property until justice is done...For everyone! I will...scream...at...you and yours forever!" Dark Lady breathed out each word in-between the vicious impact of the lashes. Eventually she passed out, never regaining consciousness in this world. Her final plea to God was that the truth would someday be known.

DARK LADY'S MESSAGE

Present Day,

Kathy Marconi leaned her slim, fit body over the table to examine the closing paperwork. She tucked a lock of her dark red hair behind her ear, so she could read without it hanging in her face. She had traveled from New York City, to this tiny town in Southern Louisiana to investigate a freak investment opportunity that had come her way.

Somehow she had won the bid for a plantation on ten acres. She looked carefully over the closing papers. She was sure there was some sort of catch, but, the only thing that raised concern was a historical deed restriction clause, half of which she couldn't read because of the font size. As far as she was concerned, anything under a six-point should be declared illegal for a binding contract. Everything else looked fine.

So far the plantation was being bought sight unseen. She had viewed the photos on-line. The place was dilapidated, but according to the ad, it *'had good bones and was setting on a solid foundation.'* From what she could tell, it was enormous, and dilapidated or not, it was still beautiful. She couldn't wait to go see it up close. In its heyday the entirety of the property had been over 700 acres. The primary crop had been sugar cane, but they had also grown a fair amount of cotton, and of course, crops to eat.

She was in no way any sort of real estate guru. She had found out about this property nearly two months ago on EBay by chance. She had seen the

poor state of the residence in the photos, but flippantly put in a bid for twenty-five dollars, figuring there would be a minimum bid cut-off. Or, at the least be easily out bid, but that hadn't happened. She was still stunned at the thought of having won the bid for a mere twenty-five bucks.

She wondered to herself, *'who accidentally buys a house, and in another state, so far from home!'* This was crazier than crazy. She had never even visited the South before, and here she was, showing up as a homeowner...so to speak.

Lauren Grayson, of the local historical society, sat across from her. Kathy thought she was a skinny, extraordinarily ordinary looking woman, complete with the traditional stringy, flat, brown hair. She was the one handling the transaction for the Bank and the Town. Apparently, the town wasn't big enough to employ a proper city attorney. It wasn't as if Lauren was not legally an attorney, but she did not care to practice, unless it suited her. She preferred to concentrate on something that really mattered to her, her cause to preserve the history of the Old South.

Lauren smiled, "You know, the town had threatened long and hard to tear the house down. They had claimed it was a public nuisance. Auctioning the house like this is an easy way to entice someone to invest in restoring the property to its former glory. It is better for the town to lose the value of the house, than to lose the entire historical value of the property altogether." She then carried on for several more minutes about its importance to future generations.

Kathy was glad when she finally shut up. It was very distracting to try to read over the paperwork with Lauren yammering on. It was almost like Lauren didn't want her to read the papers. She seemed offended that she had wanted to read them instead of blindly signing them. She continued to read over the papers, wondering if perhaps a pair of reading glasses should be next on her list of scary impulsive purchases.

After a few minutes Kathy set the paperwork down. "Well, it all looks too good to be true. That is the part that scares me." She managed a genuine smile.

"Don't worry about any surprise charges, it's all legit. Here is the total bill, including closing costs and transfer fees." Ms. Grayson laid a bill for

\$48.13 on the table in front of Kathy. "The property taxes have been paid for the year. We, at the local Historical Society opted to have their property tax refund placed back onto the property. Normally the taxes are about \$1500 a year, which of course will go up once improvements are done. The tax assessor estimates they will be about \$5400 a year when it's all said and done. We really are more interested in preserving the history of the place, and we hoped to inspire the new owner, you, to preserve it."

Lauren seemed timid in stating the tax information, but Kathy didn't bat an eye at it. Her co-op fee was three times that on her little apartment in Manhattan, so even when the taxes did reset, it would still be a fifty percent savings compared to what she was used to.

Although her first impression of Ms. Grayson seemed nice, Kathy immediately didn't like her, something about her seemed fake and disingenuous. Additionally, the ad on EBay had said nothing about any sort of oppressive historical restoration restrictions. However, she was not surprised to have found them in the city records. She had supposed the house would have them, since the ad had included that the house had been built in 1810. It was a lucky assumption for her, but a suspicious omission that gave her reason for immediate distrust.

"May I have a copy of the historical restoration restrictions?" Kathy asked, smiling. She could play the fake pleasantry game too. She had deliberately left off the fact that she already had the plantation's history, and was well aware of its historical restrictions, including its haunted past. She knew if she could restore the house, and get it on the National Historical Registry...She stopped herself. *No, Kathy, just flip the property, and go home!* She scolded herself. To her, this house had one purpose only, and it wasn't for this to become a new place to call home.

"Of course, I'll get them now." Lauren got up and walked over to a file cabinet. The drawer creaked loudly as she pulled hard to open it. "Sorry, it needs replacing."

Kathy nodded, and turned her gaze toward the window that opened to a picture perfect small town square. The main reason she had been hoping to fix-and-flip the plantation was to use the experience to begin repairing her relationship with her parents. Once she had the main repairs underway, she

was looking forward to having her mother come down and help with the decorating. It was her hope that this would create an open dialog with her mother, which would in turn lead to one with her father. They had strongly disapproved of her career choice. The tension was so thick regarding it, that they had skipped getting together for the last few Christmases to avoid arguing over it. Hopefully, this experience would open old doors that had been slammed shut in anger.

The house's haunted past didn't scare her, for that matter neither did dead bodies. She was a retired homicide detective from the New York City Police Department. She had retired about six months ago, which was four years earlier than planned. She had grown too weary to hold out, drained to the core with the politics that surrounded her job. To make matters worse, there had been a scandal with her partner, Randy. She had been drawn into the drama of it as a witness. She was tired of fighting the so-called good fight. It was someone else's turn. When the city had offered a buy-out to anyone with more than fifteen years, she had jumped on the chance to escape. It ended up working out very well for her, financially speaking, but emotionally she was still reeling from what had happened with Randy.

The only problem now was that she was fully retired at the age of thirty-seven. She was no spring chicken, but she was nowhere near old enough to retire for real. Even after this short time, boredom had already begun to set in. That would explain why she had been surfing EBay for ridiculous out of state deals on mansions. She could have refused to come, forcing them to re-list the house, but Kathy liked several things about the idea of going ahead with the deal. Both the price and history were phenomenal. And the best part was that it was *away* from Manhattan. As a bonus she was looking forward to staying here for a bit, she had never visited such a small town. In fact, Hoboken, New Jersey was the smallest place she had been to, and Hoboken was a city onto itself; there was nothing small about it at all.

She had flown into New Orleans, and then drove nearly two hours to the middle of nowhere, to check out the ridiculously low cost of living compared to home. The pleasant weather here, versus the cold winter temperatures at home made the decision to come and check it out an easy one. If nothing else, she could warm up in the nearly 70 degrees, and forget the snowy 30 degrees at home.

So far, this place reminded her of photos and movies she had seen about typical rural small towns. Everything was still 'mom-and-pop' here. The 'Big Box' stores had not yet intruded, although there was a shopping center about twenty-five minutes outside of town near the interstate.

If she decided to sell her apartment, and move here, she knew she would still be ahead financially. Even with the high cost of historical renovations the annual savings to her budget would be worth it in the long run. However, could she live someplace so small? She was a city-girl, raised by city parents, who were also raised by city people. Not only that, it was so far away from those who she was trying desperately to mend fences with. There was no way she could even think about living in this beautiful perfect place.

She scolded herself again, 'Why not! What could be wrong with just moving away and working a bit harder to forget Randy. Mom will come and visit here, probably more often than she had when she lived only ten blocks away from me.' She smiled at her internal waffling, and gave herself permission to put off making anymore rash decisions this week.

Lauren returned with the papers, "Here we go." She laid them on the table in front of Kathy.

She smiled, staring at the size two font on the contract. For the first time in a long time, she felt like everything was going to finally heal in her life; her parents' relationship, her job, her nightmares, and her future. She couldn't wait to discover what it was like to be normal. Moreover, she couldn't wait to use her house template app for her tablet, to sketch and create new home design ideas, verses gut-wrenching crime scenes. She smiled, it would be the first time she used it for a diagram that did not feature a body as the focal point of the room.

Ms. Grayson sifted through another folder and pulled out another document. She laid it next to the copy of the historical restrictions. "This is an addendum releasing some of the restrictions, but not all. We recognize that some things may not be able to be restored completely. You'll find all the appropriate signatures on the last page. Although we hope that you would consider working to put it on the National Historical Register, by fully restoring it. If you have a mind for it, it would make an excellent Bed

and Breakfast. There is a significant history there, and people would like to visit. The original stables are still there, but they would need some restoration as well. People would love to board their horses there, and then ride them on the property."

"Historical restrictions released? Really," she asked, ignoring all the business plans Lauren just suggested, but was pleasantly surprised by the release. That would indeed make it easier to restore and flip the property. And that must be what that size two font paragraph was about.

Kathy had been in city government for a long time. Releasing such restrictions would have been almost an act of congress where she was from; if it could even be done. She had seen the city, and the people who live there, spend outrageous amounts of money trying to save a ratty old place. It would have been cheaper to demolish it, and then build two exact replicas, using the original plans and building techniques, while paying extra to find and employ descendants of the original builders. It was one thing to preserve history, but it was another thing to be hysterical about it. The good thing about the standard restrictions on historical home was that the interior was normally excluded.

One thing was for sure, the kitchen would have to be modern. She would not have anything to do with restoring it to 1810 standards. She loved to cook, so an ultra-modern, gourmet kitchen was high on the priority list. And the best part was that the purchase price was more than good enough to do a complete historical restoration on the exterior without breaking her financial will to live. She was sure Ms. Grayson could be talked into reinstating the old historical restrictions very easily, if necessary.

"Yes, Kathy, we were more concerned that the house wasn't left to rot into the ground." She noticed that Ms. Grayson's pleasant tone of voice did not match her tight-fake smile.

It was all she could do to not return the fake smile shown her. Lauren was definitely hiding something! After years and years of dealing with lying murderers, Kathy knew a liar when she saw one. But, she was also accustomed to reviewing the evidence, and so far, everything Lauren had told her checked out. This meant that if she was lying, then her lies were lies of omission. Kathy supposed she would figure it out sooner or later.

Hopefully, whatever it was wouldn't be too terrible to deal with.

"I know you don't normally take cash, but I am hoping you can make an exception in this case", Kathy said, handing over a fifty dollar bill. She flipped the pages to the signature page, and then signed them.

Lauren smiled, "I think in this case a check would only increase the cost." She gave Kathy a receipt, copies of all the closing papers, the keys and alarm codes, and then displayed the unmistakable body language of someone who had just been cleared of a crime, they actually committed.

Kathy wondered what it could be that had everyone on edge with the house. This morning, the man at the hardware store had told her how sorry he was for her for *'getting stuck'* with *'that'* house.

Kathy said good-bye, and Lauren thanked her for buying the house in what seemed to be the only genuine sounding statement she had said to Kathy since she got the first phone call from her reminding her of the bid. Knowing that the bid was ridiculously low, she had forgotten all about it shortly after making it.

After she left she stopped at a diner for lunch, since she couldn't find a Starbucks. To her, that fact alone was reason enough to not live here on a permanent basis. She ate, and reviewed the local newspaper. It looked as if nothing went on here, but that wasn't a bad thing. After sixteen years in police work, she was ready for some boredom. It was nice to be in a place where the front page news was the winning pie recipe at the town's winter festival, and not some hideous crime spree, awful wreck on the highway, or the robbery and shooting of an innocent victim.

She pulled out her new GPS, typed in the address, and then followed it to her new house.

About fifteen minutes later, she arrived to find a rusty iron gate and matching fence that ran the entire length of the front of the property. Across the street was the beginning edge of a wooded area. The map showed the woods to be the leading edge of a large bayou. The Spanish moss hung low in the trees, and a bird sang a lazy tune on a nearby limb.

She looked back and took a hard long look at her new purchase. The

fence was thick with over grown weeds, vines, and trees. It was obvious that the property hadn't been trimmed in probably twenty years. She took out her phone and snapped several pictures, uploading to her Facebook page. Overgrown or not, this seemed like a peaceful place upon her first glance. She was pleased at the prospect of giving things a fresh start.

She got out of the car, and unlocked the gate. The driveway alone was impressive. It was lined with the enormous, Spanish Moss covered, Magnolia trees. Even in its rundown condition, the plantation was an impressive and beautiful place. It spoke of its once great splendor. Kathy immediately loved the house, and now understood Lauren's actions to try to save it. She hopped back in the car, and drove slowly toward her reward.

She smiled, "You'll be the perfect distraction," she told the house.

The roof of the stable, located behind the house, was visible from the street. At first thought she wondered if it would make a great garage. There would be plenty of time to reflect on the best use of the space later, since there were more important matters to consider.

The main house had two stories, with high dormer windows along the roof line. Dual upper and lower wraparound porches hugged the house like a warm blanket. The once welcoming yellow paint was now faded and mostly peeled away. All of the windows on the main floor were actually doorways that opened out onto the porches. As she looked around she realized that there were no proper windows, as one would think of them, except in the upper attic dormers. Essentially the house had twenty doors to the outside, at least.

She parked by the front steps, and gingerly stepped around the holes that had rotted through the front porch. Like a child, she plastered her face against the old windows to capture a first view of the prize inside. She was disappointed though, she couldn't see much. The windows were extremely old, and dirty. She was impressed to see the condition they were in, she couldn't believe they were still intact.

Back home the windows were the first things to be broken in an abandoned house, followed quickly by the cooper pipes being ripped out. She wondered if she could replace them with stained glass, and still be

within the historical limitations. She wasn't at all comfortable with the prospect of all this clear glass on a home. If the windows were clean, someone could see directly into the house. Long isolated driveway or not, she didn't like the idea of people being able to look in.

She took out the lone skeleton key that, according to Lauren fit every door in the house. The stable had a modern key. The previous owners had found it necessary to secure it better, in order to keep wandering ghost hunting trespassers out. As she entered through the grand double front door, she was quick to notice that the foyer alone was bigger than her entire apartment. In fact, her whole home could fit right inside this room.

The room itself was in need of some serious help. The wallpaper that had been applied by some former owner was lying in heaps on the floor. Apparently it had peeled off in some bygone day, exposing the original teal peacock wall paper underneath. It was incredible; there must have been at least four or five layers of it lying around the room. It was almost like the house was rejecting the modern wallpaper, in favor of the old stuff. She ran her hand over the wall, and was surprised that it felt slightly metallic. The most surprising thing was that, overall, it seemed to be in good shape for being two hundred years old.

"Can you be saved?" she said, out loud to no one in particular, having no idea that single question would set her on the mystery of a life time as the challenge '*to be saved*' was accepted.

She turned to look at the staircase, and frowned. She had hoped for a grand staircase, something along the lines of the one in *Gone with the Wind*, but this one reminded her of the one in her grandmother's old house. It was disappointingly normal, especially given the grandeur of the house.

To her left was a grand dining room, and adjoining ballroom. The tattered furniture of the former owner was still in the dining room. An ornate built-in china cabinet, in dire need of refurbishing stretched the entire length of the back wall. The dining room table stretched from end to end, and would serve twelve easily. It was also in dire need of refinishing, but like the house, it was solid, and would one day be a beautiful piece of furniture again. On the other hand, she wasn't so sure about the chairs. It appeared to her untrained eye that they might be done for. The dining set

was the only furniture in the house.

To her right was the living room. Against the far wall of the room was a fire place, with a period mantle still in place, she could stand inside the fireplace. A small, but once elegant parlor was located at the rear of room, with a set of grand oak sliding doors, that much to Kathy's shock, still worked. She noticed that the wallpaper was also off the walls in here, exposing a once delicate paint job of what reminded Kathy of a bayou scene. It was terribly faded.

"How strange, it seems like they could just sit upstairs, and look out the front to get the bayou scene?" she said, to herself. She was referring to the edge of the bayou across the street. If she went to all of the trouble of painting something on the wall, she would think that it would be different from the one that could be viewed out the window.

She strolled slowly back out into the foyer. At the back were a set of double pocket doors that opened into what should have been an enormous kitchen. It was strange to look at, there was nothing in there. Even the plaster had been stripped from the walls. Compared to all of the other rooms she'd seen so far, this was just a big brown money-pit of a room.

"Well, at least I know for sure now that the kitchen is the first thing that needs to be bought," she said, closing the doors. She smiled as her eyes took in the bones of what this room could be, with all these gorgeous door-windows at the backside of the house it would be the perfect place to have breakfast in the mornings.

She smirked at herself, "Marconi, you're already living here." People looking to flip a house, didn't daydream about sitting in the kitchen while eating breakfast in the morning. They planned for other people to be able to do so.

This was a bittersweet find. Kitchens are expensive, but right now she still had a large budget for it, and with the room being a large blank slate, she could make it any way she wanted it. She was aware she was still smiling, *'any way she wanted it?'* She shook her head, the idea of simply flipping the house was getting further and further from her mind.

She thought she heard steps behind her. Startled, she turned to

face...nothing. She looked around, and back in the kitchen, but nothing was there. She dismissed it as normal old house noises, and headed back into the foyer.

She had no idea that she couldn't see the gruesome sight of the Dark Lady's image in front of her, screaming. *The next quilt is red, you must leave.* But the warning would go unheeded.

The stairway of disappointment, as Kathy couldn't help but call it, was to the immediate right of the pocket doors. As she got a better glance at them she was thankful to see that they were in good shape and only needed resurfacing.

Kathy went up the stairs, stopping on the landing, and looked up the remaining six steps. The upstairs mezzanine was a mirror-image of the foyer downstairs, including the only set of double doors that opened to the upstairs wraparound balcony. The other door-windows were just single doors, and not double. She couldn't wait to enjoy a coffee out there!

To the right was the smallest guest bedroom Kathy had seen in a house this size. It was obvious the room size had been changed at some point. To her, it appeared it had some footage cut off to incorporate a full size modern bathroom. The original house plans had included a traditional water-closet and then a separate room for the tub. It was the tub-room that now acted as the bathroom, with about three feet of what used to be the guest room. The water-closet was now a linen closet.

She quickly looked over the rest of the rooms that were upstairs. The library would be a perfect office once the old, dusty law books of the former owners were removed. There were three *normal* mansion sized bedrooms on this level. The master bedroom on the other hand took the entire south side of the house, and had its own sitting room, and large linen closet that could easily be converted into a walk-in closet.

She looked at the two smaller rooms toward the rear of the house and smiled. They would be the perfect gateway to inviting her mother down for a visit. Kathy didn't like her mother's historical-Victorian taste, but in the grand scheme of things, who cared what the guest rooms looked like? She could *give* her mother these two rooms to restore, and she would have a

field day. And as a bonus she would probably do the time period justice.

"I hereby dub you the rooms of *restored hope*," she said, crossing herself, again unaware that 'restored hope' meant something else to the spirits here.

The one toward the front of the house was more like a mini-master bedroom that Kathy thought of it as the 'real' second bedroom. She found herself smirking as she gazed into it. It was just a bit smaller than her entire apartment. Again, the wallpaper had suffered the same fate as the rest of the modern wallpaper throughout the house. She opened the door-windows, smiling as the warm air bathed her face.

She closed her eyes, still smiling. A black fog filled the room behind her.

"I could really get used to this," she thought out loud. There was something unreal about the calm of the place. She never wanted to leave here.

She opened her eyes slowly and went out on the porch, never seeing the fog behind her as she stepped away from it. She walked back toward the master bedroom, and looked in the windows. She glanced around, noting that the wrap around balcony was wider than it had looked from below. She was sure she could fit an entire patio set out here, and still have enough room for her to take a morning run around the 'upper track' as she renamed it in her mind. She gingerly leaned on the railing, glad to see that it was still very solid. The view of the trees lining the drive to the gate would be enough to tempt her away from her Starbucks! Perhaps she could buy some coffee online and make it here? She decided she needed to buy a lawn chair this afternoon, so she could have dinner this evening, right here on this spot.

She took out her skeleton key and went in the porch door that led to the master bedroom.

She figured that the small sitting room in the master bedroom would make an excellent master bath, especially since the sitting room also connected to the library. One wall had a built-in bookcase along the entire length of the room, with a fireplace dividing it in the center. It was the only room that still had the 1970's office decor intact.

"Yuck!" She walked out the single pane door in the sitting room and looked out at the backyard. It seemed to stretch on for a long way. The roof tops of the subdivision at the back could be seen toward the rear of the property.

Beyond the missing kitchen, the ad was dead-on. It was true that the house had good bones. She was certain it wouldn't be long before she could actually stay here, of course, if she decided to.

"Hello! Police!" a male voice came from downstairs.

"Oh my! The alarm! I am so sorry. I completely forgot to shut it off," Kathy said startled.

She raced down the stairs feeling really stupid. How many false alarms had she answered, and then cursed the owner under her breath! A dark haired, very young officer stood at the bottom of the stairs, smiling.

"I have the codes right here." She punched in the codes, and the alarm reset. "Gosh! Again, I am so sorry officer. I must have let the beauty and potential of this old place go to my head." She pointed to her head, and then fanned her arms out.

"They said someone bought this ol' spook house," the officer said, extending a hand, "I am Mike Rose. Did anyone tell you about the deaths and ghosts in this place?"

"Kathy Marconi," she smiled, shaking his hand. He had a firm, but polite grip. "And I am a retired homicide detective. If the spirits I've crossed paths with on the job haven't spooked or spoken to me yet, they aren't going to start now," she said, still smiling.

She tried to remember all the times she had stood in the middle of a homicide scene and tried to 'contact' the victim, to ask what had happened. She knew it seemed like a stupid thing to do, but when a person is stretched out dead in front of you, and you have no idea what happened, it didn't seem so odd to ask the only person in the room who was there. If she had been able to actually see beyond this worldly realm she would have been astounded to know how many spirits had, literally, screamed answers in her face, only to be unheard.

"You don't look old enough to be retired," he said, looking her up and down. She was a fit, pretty woman, and didn't look a day over thirty five. Her dark, red hair and dark, green eyes still suggested there was a lot of youth left in them. He would have to introduce her to his older brother, Jason. He could use a decent girl for once; after all he had been through with the crazy ones he seemed to attract.

"It's one of the benefits of starting young in a twenty and out profession. You are still young enough to have the luxury of a whole second career when you retire." She maintained a pleasant tone, but the whole point of moving here was to start over. Maybe she shouldn't have introduced herself as a retired detective. She would have to work on that. If she was going to move on, then she needed to move on.

He smiled, and nodded, all the while looking around. "I haven't been in here, properly, since I was sixteen. My brother dared me to sleep overnight in the slave's quarters up on the third floor." He pointed up.

"Really?" Kathy was shocked to hear the words *slaves' quarters*, but she was not sure why. It had been a sugar cane plantation that was two hundred years old, and in the Deep South. "What did you see that night? Perhaps the ghosts you mentioned earlier are just pissed off slaves."

"Probably, Lord knows I would have been one pissed off puppy. The Caine family has a mixed history of heroes and villains. Modern day, soap-opera writers would have a field day with their family history."

She hadn't thought about the windows along the roof line being a third floor. She turned, and looked up the stairs to the second floor. She hadn't remembered even seeing a staircase that led to the third floor.

"If it's alright I can show you the way," he said, pointing to the kitchen. He had noticed her looking around and was certain she was looking for a way to the third floor, and figured he would just point it out.

"Lead the way," she said smiling. She was quickly realizing that she would have to find out more about what the locals believed about this place. Beat officers were the best sources of useful local information about a neighborhood. He would know all the local legends of this place, including who started them, which ones were most likely true, and which

ones were just meant to scare people.

He went through the double slider doors and into the kitchen, rounded the corner, and proceeded directly to a tiny pantry closet. At the back of the closet was a steep, narrow staircase.

"That's the only way to the third floor," he said, starting up the narrow steps, having to walk up them sideways in order to avoid bumping his gun belt along the wall.

"Yes, heaven forbid the slaves were able to use the main staircase, and free up the square footage," she said, thinking the staircase was really cramped. But was a size six, and still had to turn sideways to avoid the submers. It was funny, she could work horrific crime scenes, but if a simple submers touched her, she wasn't sure she could keep herself from climbing over Mike's shoulders, screaming the whole way.

He smiled. "That's middle-class Yankee talk. Think about it, even the houses of the ultra rich, in modern times, have their own servant's entrance, at least the northern and the southern states. Race has a lot to do with a lot of things, but certainly not that. That's a class issue. The staff, black or white, uses the staff staircase."

She wanted to huff but didn't. She knew he was right. Her parents had a maid, but didn't come through the front door either. She wasn't sure why it was giving her a "feeling," maybe she hadn't given much thought to the Old South, but now it was staring her in the face.

The door finally opened up to the third floor. The attic was an open expanse of rafters. In between the rafters were rows of built-in beds and foot lockers. The mattresses and personal belongings were long gone, of course. By the condition of the place it was clear that no one had been up here in a long while, probably since Officer Ross had stayed here as a kid. And even without the impact of a human touch, the attic was impressive! It would be easy to turn it into living space, perhaps even an apartment.

"That's where the women slaves, the ones who ran the house, lived. The kitchen had six, the downstairs had three, and the upstairs had five," he said, making a powerfully motion. The Caine history was part of the local history class in elementary school.

Kathy smiled and nodded. Perhaps Mike would tell her what Lauren had left off in her assessment of the property. "Were there any ghosts on your over-nighter?"

"Yup, I call him Ethan. I don't know what his name is. He just looks like an Ethan to me." Mike shrugged. He had no way to know the boy's name was Stable Boy.

"Ethan?"

He nodded, and walked to the other end of the attic looking out the tall narrow dormer window. "He was standing right here, staring out the window, looking at the stable. He said, 'Massa bought a razor whip, and he's coming for Granny.' He was really creepy looking too. He had these white, dead looking eyes." His eyes widened as he recalled the scene from his memory.

"What did you do?" Kathy had to smile. She bet Mike could '*accidentally*' talk secret information out of priests. He was easy to talk to, and listen to with his pleasant Southern accent.

He laughed, "Got beat up by my brother, after I ran home screaming."

"It doesn't bother you to be here now?"

He shook his head no. "I don't mind. I have been back many times since then, but I have never seen Ethan again. The local teens do the same thing I did...sneak in, from time to time" He shrugged. "Of course, now it's my job to run them off. There is even a weird YouTube video. Ethan isn't in the picture frame, but I am sure that is who the boys in the video are referencing. It was strange though, they were carrying on about quilts."

"Probably, he was offended you made up a name for him?" Kathy said, smiling.

He shrugged, also smiling, "Probably, but when I saw him he wouldn't tell me his name or even talk directly to me. It was like he was stuck in a moment of time. So I figured, I can't very well call him *ghost slave kid*. Something about 'Hey *Little Anonymous Ghost Slave Dude*,' seemed more disrespectful than making up my own name for him. The name Ethan,

actually acknowledged his presence as a being, or at the least having once been a being."

She smiled and nodded. "Any other names I should know about?"

"None of mine," he gazed out the window. "But I do know several other names. The one that I have the most reports on is the Dark Lady."

"Dark Lady?" What sort of name was that?

"A slave named Kasper said she picked the name herself." He shrugged again. "Based on the description of her, I would guess she was a house slave here, possibly something like a house manager, or governess. You know, the only blacks that could get away with kicking the white kid's ass at the time." He snapped his fingers, like he was trying to remember something. "The Mammies, I think, most folks called them Mammies. I have only had reports on her in the surrounding subdivision, though. And, the only ones in there are from in the house." He pointed at the subdivision, and then the floor of the house.

Kasper smiled. If Mike was ever handcuffed, he would be speechless.

"That whole neighborhood over there was part of the sugar cane fields back in the day." He pointed, and wagged his finger back and forth to indicate the entire area at the distance. "There is only ten acres of the original property left, with a small patch of cane over there. It's strange too; sometimes it actually comes up wild over there." He shifted to point at the other end of the property. "The rumor is that Ridely, a murdered field hand, planted it, because cane isn't known to grow wild. Well, not very well anyway. It is truly a cultivated crop, if you want the best results. But, once it's in the ground the way you want it, it's practically effortless to grow. Still, working on a sugar cane plantation was a real threat to the life and limb for the slaves, especially this one. The biggest threats here were poisonous snakes, and spiders. Well, she takes into consideration the biggest non-human threat. Of course it could be argued that the humans who owned the plantation were worse than hungry gators."

"How was he murdered?"

Mike shrugged. "Left to die was more to the point, if I remember

correctly."

"Aside from the poor slaves, were there any other deaths?"

He nodded, "The four lawyer fella's that used the house for an office, all died on the property back in the 1980's. Some say the Dark Lady scared them to death, because they reminded her too much of the original Caine family," he frowned like something didn't make sense to him, "Although, it is said The Underground Railroad had a *rest stop* here. The Caine's were instrumental in running it, so they couldn't have been too bad."

He smiled, shrugged, and continued, "According to Lauren, at the Historical Society, the runaway slaves were moved at least twenty miles up state every day. It took a bit over a month and a half to walk from here to north of the Mason Dixon line. Lauren and some of the local activists walked it once. Most folks believe the Caine family would hide the runaway slaves in the caves, at the back of the property, before sneaking them out at night in freight wagons headed north. Sometimes they even used to hide the slaves in whiskey barrels." He didn't like Lauren, and hated to recommend her, but decided to keep his opinion to himself for now.

"Really?" Kathy was intrigued by the way the Underground Railroad would have operated. It seemed awfully dangerous to just start walking. A network would be needed to make things safer, but networks had their own problems. She would have to go check out the caves he mentioned later. However, the area seemed a bit swampy for caves, and with a bayou so close, wouldn't it just fill up during a heavy rainstorm? Perhaps her definition of a cave was different than his.

He nodded, "Yes, I am not sure of the whole history. Lauren Grayson would be able to tell you more. I think some of the runaways were killed by hunters back in the day, and that is why the subdivision gets reports of ghosts. It's the area that is haunted, not the houses. You know, like that movie *Poltergeist*, where the houses were built on the graveyard."

Kathy nodded. "Do you happen to know if there any old reports on the runaways being murdered, you know, some official reports, not ghost stories?"

"I am sure there are some on file at the library, or in the police archives.

My brother is Chief of Police here, so I could introduce you to him. I am sure he could help you find what you are looking for," he said smiling. He knew it would be all too easy to get her to meet Jason. He was certain that he would like Ms. Marconi, a lot. So far, her mannerisms reminded him very much of his brother. "See that house with the gray roof?" He pointed, and Kathy nodded, "My wife and I looked at that house when it was up for sale a couple of years ago, but it smelled like a homicide inside, so I wouldn't buy it."

"Really?" She knew the smell well, that salty, iron rich, smell, that was signature of copious amounts of blood everywhere.

She looked out the window at the house he was pointing to and something red flashed in the distance. It looked like a blanket was hanging on a line in the backyard. Her curiosity was piqued. She would have to find a way to go and visit them, just to see if she could smell it. She stopped herself, *No, Kathy, that would be creepy and weird! You're retired, just be retired, and let it go.*

"Hey, you were a homicide detective; maybe you could come and check it out?"

Being the workaholic Kathy was, she jumped on the chance. "Oh yes! I would be honored." *Okay, so, not so creepy and weird.*

"Excellent," he said, smiling. "Well ma'am, I'll let you get back to work."

"Oh, call me Kathy, please, and I am sorry about the alarm." As she looked at him, she thought back to her first years on the job. She wondered if she ever looked that young, because Mike looked like he could still be in high school, let alone out of the academy.

Kathy stifled a sigh and thought about her age and situation. *I am getting old, despite the fact that everyone insists 37 isn't old.* She saw Mike to the door, and then headed back upstairs.

She took notes with the rest of her time at the house, making a sketch of the floor plan, before retiring to her motel room. She ordered a dumpster, started looking for house painters, and then spent the rest of the afternoon devoted to getting her new kitchen on a functional time line for installation.

The ghost stories drifted further into the back of her mind, while the idea of actually moving into a completely renovated home was becoming more viable in her imagination.

Both of her parents would love to visit here, especially in the winter. She could hardly wait to get her life back on track. It was time to stop crying, and move forward.

The next morning Kathy was extraordinarily lucky, and found her idea of the perfect kitchen. To add to her good fortune, a local company, recommended by Mike, had an opening to install it, and they agreed to do the drywall. If the drywall installation went as expected, the kitchen should be functional enough for her to move-in in about two weeks. It was extraordinary luck! Of course, the huge bonus she had offered may have helped too.

Mike had said she would almost have to use this contractor because he was from the next town over, and he thought the locals would shy away. A crew from out of town wouldn't be as terrified of the place as others who had grown up in the shadow of the Caine Plantation. The only upsetting part was that Mike was right! She had tried to get bids from two in-town companies, who had been happy to help, until they found out the job was at the Caine Plantation. Then suddenly they were *booked, and must have looked at the date wrong*. She sighed; so much for getting three bids. Regardless, the contractor, who was willing to bid at all, was very reasonably priced and had a mile long list of happy customers, along with the blessing of local law enforcement.

As for the cabinets, she couldn't have found a better deal. Thank heavens, for displays being ripped out at home improvement centers. As Luck would have it, the store would deliver them this afternoon. They wanted them off of the sales floor ASAP so the new display could go up. It was over a 75% savings.

It was almost like the house, the town, and the whole area, was going out of its way to make her feel welcome. She had felt so unwelcome at home, and the change in circumstances was appreciated.

It had been a little less than a year since the incident that led to Randy's dismissal from the department. She had been stunned at how people she had known for more than a decade had treated her once they found out the extent of what happened. At home she had been given the cold shoulder to the point that she just wanted to quit, but here things were bright and new: Literally a breath of fresh air. For the first time since the event, she finally felt like things were going her way.

For a late breakfast she sat alone in the diner with papers and books strewn out all over the table. It held any books and research on the Caine Plantation the librarian would let her check out, or photocopy from the microfiche machine. She had pulled only historical documents, since she simply did not believe in ghosts, or the stories that surrounded them. To her a ghost was the murder victim of an unsolved murder. She and her fellow detectives had called them *ghosts* because the files seemed to haunt the homicide office, distracting and disturbing the detectives while the files constantly reminded them that someone was getting away with murder. Eventually they were classified as cold cases.

She had worked through, and solved, many of the cold cases that had been on her desk when she had been assigned to Homicide. When she retired, only three had remained on her desk. Hopefully, whoever was promoted into her position would bring some new ideas, and be able to bring the family of the 'ghost file' some peace. She pushed the cold cases from her mind. She didn't like the thought that someone could, and had in the past, got away with murder. Luckily cold cases weren't the norm, and most of the time the suspect was caught right away. In fact, on at least two occasions the murderers had called in themselves to say the victim deserved it, which made it easy for the police to find them.

She stifled a smirk, now that is someone who is pissed off at you; blow your brains out, and then called to say you had your comeuppance. The idea of being that angry with someone was alien to her.

She looked at an old news photo of the Caine plantation. It was from the early 1900's. Even at ninety years old, the house still looked good, but it was showing its age. The trees were trimmed, and all the doorways to both of the upper and lower porches were open. The photograph captured a woman who was standing in the upper window, far back into the shadows.

There was a faint outline of the belle-style gown she was wearing. It was obscured into the shadows like the edges of it faded away. The headline read *Is 'Dark Lady' Still Caring for the Caine Home?* The article followed an attempt by a Caine family member to sell the house, but the buyers had been 'run off' by a screaming black fog. Later it was classified as swamp gas.

Mike had been at the diner briefly, until he was sent out on a burglary report. He told her a bit about the little girl who lives in the house that he had pointed out yesterday. It seemed that she called the police all the time to report there was a lady who hides in her closet, crying. Thankfully, the girl only visited her father every other weekend. He told her he could 'pert near' set his watch by the girl's bedtime. He was really glad, he and his wife had decided against buying the house. He couldn't imagine how much his two sons and daughter would have been scared.

"Something ain't right 'bout that place," he had said, before heading out to his call. "I mean, something ain't right 'bout the entire property that used to be the Caine Plantation, as a whole, not just what remains of it."

The waitress brought her plate out. She smiled as she looked at the contents. At first she had turned her nose up at the grits on her plate. It was a given, every single dish for both breakfast and lunch, especially if you ate before noon, came with grits. Once she was brave enough to try them, she found that she really liked them.

Additionally, there was something called a crawdad that was also on the menu. She hadn't been brave enough to try them yet. They reminded her of little lobsters, and she already knew she hated lobster.

On Mike's recommendation, she had ordered the sweet tea. It was by far the most heavenly tea she had ever tasted. There was no way she could ever go back to her favorite restaurant back home and have sweet tea again; it would never measure up. What had Mike said about it; "No mo' Yankee tea."

She had steered clear of the bamboo shoot looking stuff on her plate, until the waitress had shown her how to eat it. It was raw sugar cane, and it too was heavenly! The waitress also told her she could stick the whole slice of sugar cane into her tea, or coffee. Kathy ordered an un-sweet tea to try it,

and it was even more delicious.

She did caution Kathy against pulling up the cane from the field, and eating it at the plantation. "Cook knows how to prepare it, and don't eat that part", she said pointing. "At least not until you familiarize yourself with how to fix it. Trust me, it can be gross, and if you make juice with it, it goes bad really fast, so drink it right away."

Kathy smiled and nodded. She would have to master this sugar cane thing!

She pulled out some copies of official papers, and flipped through them to find a small stack of title transfer documents. She was surprised to learn that someone in the Caine family had owned the home until the mid-eighties. They had lived in the house in virtual poverty, until the last known Caine descendant passed away. Arthur Caine had no children, and had resorted to subdividing the fields into a massive subdivision to earn money.

When Arthur died, it had become a lawyer's office for about three years, until all the partners mysteriously died within a year of each other. One fell down the stairs, the small staircase from the kitchen to the attic. Their secretary said he had been screaming about a bleeding little boy who threatened to whip him bloody. One was run over by a golf cart when he returned from a green he had constructed at the back of the property. The remaining one had a heart attack, after babbling to a 911 operator about a red quilt.

The final surviving partner's wife further subdivided the plantation's land to its current size. She then donated the remainder, including the house, to a local women's shelter. However when they began updating the kitchen to a commercial kitchen the construction crews couldn't get past installing the kitchen. They kept complaining...Something about a purple quilt and they worried about mysterious food that seemed to show up at noon. Once they heard the legend of Marissa Caine being poisoned by a kitchen slave with food. They refused to return, because they were convinced Dark Lady was after them with that food that was appearing. Nothing had been done to the property since then.

"Well that explains the state of the kitchen," Kathy said to herself. Next

she pulled out an obituary.

She was disappointed that she couldn't follow up with the lawyer's wife, because she died four years ago in a nursing home. The wife had never claimed anything supernatural about the plantation, but then, she had not lived there. It had been used as an office by her husband.

She used her tablet to try to find more recent news articles on the plantation, but there was nothing beyond teenagers scaring each other, and paranormal investigators running around with their equipment embarrassing themselves.

She found a YouTube video of two boys. She was sure this was the one Mike had mentioned at their first meeting. From what she could tell they looked to be about fourteen. They were walking through the house, cussing, swearing, and kicking at the heaps of wallpaper. The video was shaky, as they made their way up the narrow kitchen stairs to the attic.

"We're here at the old Caine Plantation, were the crazed Dark Lady still haunts her Master's home. It is said, that she killed her Mistress by poisoning her food, and that she is even murderous in her death. Those men, who used the house as an office, all died...on the property...under mysterious circumstances. One dude was even run over by a ghost in a golf cart," a pimply face, strawberry-blond boy said, sounding more and more frightened as he spoke.

"Dude, you're scared," the voice of whoever was holding the camera giggled a bit.

"No, I am not, shut up! I am building drama," the other said quickly, putting his hands on his hips. "Great! Now we'll have to edit that!"

Kathy smirked, the kid was terrified. He was talking faster, with a higher pitch in his voice, and his eyes were as wide as any terrified crime victim she had ever talked to.

The boys continued up to the top of the stairs. "Pan the whole attic, use the low light mode," dude said, spreading his arms out.

"Dude, micromanage much!" the operator complained. He jerkily

panned the room, catching his own left hand in the frame giving *Dude* the bird.

Kathy had to pull the screen back a bit to follow it, "Mr. Camera Operator, you aren't going to work for '*Discovery Channel*' anytime soon." His constant shaking and panning at near light speed was making her want to shut it off.

There was nothing in the attic. It was no different than when Kathy was up there with Mike, but the sound in the boys' voices was that of primal fear.

"Hey, Dude...What's that?" An arm pointed to the place where Mike had indicated he had seen Ethan, but there was nothing on the video by the window. It was just an empty space, by the last dormer window.

Dude turned toward the area. His mouth flew open, "Holy Shit! I mean, hey little guy what are you doing here?"

"Dude! What is it! His eyes are bleeding!. He isn't on the camera's screen!" The camera operator was backing away. The camera jerked, while *dude* checked the viewing screen on the back.

"What..." Dude's voice trailed off. "Tell the homicide detective that the quilt is red." He pointed at the camera operator. "What does that..." *Dude* didn't get a chance to finish the question before his eyes widened. He let out a blood curdling, primal scream, and then nearly killed himself trying to get down the stairs, and out of the house.

Kathy stared at the screen! "No," she whispered, watching the video several more times. What homicide detective? It couldn't be her! This video was over sixteen years old, even if it was uploaded recently. It was taken just before she was hired onto the force, and a heck of a long time before she was promoted to detective. "What did the quilt is read mean?"

She would have to find Mike, and check out any homicides in the area with a red quilt; sixteen years ago. She remembered something; *didn't that house Mike pointed out have a red quilt hanging outside?*

Kathy flipped through the comments for the video, and found one that

was continuously re-posted, by the person who had submitted the video, Mtlaw2002.

Mtlaw2002 posted: 'Just stop it! Leave me alone.' The last time it was updated was two weeks ago.

The other comments were more of a cyber-bullying nature, questioning the poster's sanity. Mtlaw2002's comment could be a response to the cyber-bullies. One thing was for sure, these 'dudes' were obviously witnesses to a murder, and were using this video as an excuse to get the information out. Not only that, but more than a decade later, they were still being stalked by someone. She did an Internet search for murder and red quilt. Nothing came back, except the YouTube video she had just watched.

She texted herself a message to check with the police about it later. Perhaps it was an old cold case?

Next, she searched ghosts and Caine Plantation. Many more videos came back. Some were a mimic of the boys' original video. The only difference was the dialog. One group of boys wanted to see what Mtlaw2002 and Dude saw. All ran from the house screaming about a bleeding little boy. Another group chickened out before making it to the top of the stairs. Some were parodies of the boys' panicking. This included a group of burly, well-built young men dressed as girls, who used the exact same dialog as the Mtlaw2002 video, except with high, fake, squeaky voices.

She put her tablet away and turned her attention to one of the many copies of different random micro-film articles that she had decided to collect from the time period.

There was an article in the headlines about the British, and some national politics that was surely leading toward what was to become The War of 1812. The plantation had been untouched by the war, and was positioned well to help rebuild the community. As a result there were many puff-pieces on the Caine's, and their neighbors, the Blanc's. There were other plantations around, but none as wealthy and influential as the Caine-Blanc alliance.

She almost snorted, as she wondered if any of them tried to force their daughters to marry into each other's family to strengthen the alliance. Some

medieval ideas just won't die down.

Kathy thought for a moment before pulling out her tablet, again searching *The War 1812*. She wondered if the war had migrated this far west in the South? Instantly she had the answer, it had apparently reached New Orleans, so yes this far west, but not to this area, which is a bit northeast of New Orleans.

She smiled; someone was an excellent master of public relations back in the day. Because, if the battle lines on her tablet were true, the war was never a threat to this area. Indeed the plantation had been untouched, because the entire area was untouched. Nothing needed rebuilding, but the Caine's got credit for *rebuilding* it anyway.

The Civil War was a whole different animal though. That was fifty years later, and by then the plantation's heydays were already waning. Apparently, there was a difference between working the public relations angle and actually balancing the management of the sugar cane business. It would appear that the next generation of Caine's who took over weren't as well suited at running the plantation as the elder Caine.

She pulled out another article from August 1855. The headline announced that the monthly town picnics, held by the little river that ran through downtown, would be ending for the season in late October. However Rainier Riverboat would continue the dinner cruise until Thanksgiving. But, that wasn't what got Kathy's attention. It was the little blurb at the bottom of the last page.

Percy Gerrell Caine, son of William Alistair Caine, arrested for trafficking.

That was all that was printed. She thought it was an odd little tidbit of news. Especially given the level of difficulty the presses of that era had putting out newspapers when compared to modern times. It hardly seemed worth the effort to print it, since the so-called *fonts* had to be hand set in a tremendously time consuming procedure. Percy must have made some bad politics with the media for them to spend the time it took to hand-typeset such a teeny headline.

However, if there was one thing Kathy knew about the media was that if

the rest of the story was missing, that was a bigger clue than the headline itself. Unfortunately, there was no way to know what that clue specifically was, without asking the reporter or editor in person. Obviously that wasn't going to happen. Was this an attempt to cover up or bury a story, while still claiming they reported it? Or, was it a lack of evidence, and that was all they had to print?

What had he been trafficking? What sort of things were illegal to traffic in 1855? Surely it wasn't cocaine or marijuana, it wasn't illegal then. Cocaine didn't become illegal until 1907, and marijuana was much later.

She knew that the Caine's were known to have dabbled in the Underground Railroad. Perhaps it had been a cryptic message, like the red quilt seemed to be to the boys in the video. It had been running through her mind...What did '*The next quilt was red*' mean? Likewise, was Percy really arrested, or was it a code buried on the back pages? If so, who was it meant for?

What difference did it make whose son he was? It was an arrest record, not an obituary. Law enforcement didn't care who your family was when you were arrested. Even if the police were afraid of the Caine politics, they certainly wouldn't have cared enough about it to note his genealogy on his arrest report. They are only for documenting evidence relevant to the case, not a family history. She made a note to get a copy of Percy's arrest record.

She made a note on the article, and put it in her pocket, adding it to the list of things she was curious about. This town, as a whole, wasn't short on secrets. She wondered if the police would allow her access to their archives. Mike had mentioned when they met that his brother was chief. Perhaps she should request an introduction. She could certainly use something to keep her busy while she was waiting for her kitchen to get up and running, and a cold case, no, correct that, a frozen case, would be an interesting distraction indeed.

She pulled out another article, this one from just after the Civil War in 1866. This was no buried blurb though, it was a full front page spread. The local paper was exposing the fact that the Caine family had been helping slaves on the Underground Railroad, prior to the war. Percy had died nearly four years before, trampled by his own gray mare. His son, Andrew, had

been killed in what seemed to be ten minutes into his service for the Civil War. It was Percy's youngest son, only fifteen at the time, who eventually took over the plantation.

This exposé was written a couple of years after the slaves were freed, so why would it matter? Perhaps that was what Percy was trafficking? With nearly fifty years of experience at taking African Americans to freedom they would have had plenty of experience at getting away with it by the time the second or third generations had taken over. She sipped her tea, and then read on, reserving judgment on the validity of anything the media wrote.

The piece in her hand virtually condemned the Caine's for what was only referred to as onerous business practices. One former shop owner's statement said that prior to the war, her dress shop had been put out of business, and it all stemmed by the loss of all of her black seamstresses. The shop owner was concerned to point of being frightened for their welfare, because everyone worked as a family. It didn't seem probable that they would all simply leave. She also added that none of her black seamstresses were slaves. They had been free women. And, if they were leaving of their own accord, they simply would have left a message saying so. Instead, she blamed the Caine's for the disappearance of her seamstresses. The article's author questioned whether or not the shop owner was being truthful, because the local economy had been terrible going into the war and it made perfect sense that the women, whom the paper believed were indeed slaves, would go North and find better paying jobs, or jobs that paid at all.

The article also commented on the Caine's involvement with the Underground Railroad, and that they had taken care to drop any runaway slaves into states that refused to comply with the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

One of the political pork items in the Missouri Compromise was a law that ordered Free states to return runaway slaves back to their masters. It was so controversial that the U.S. Supreme Court ended up having to issue a decision when the South filed a suit complaining that the law was not being enforced. The justices had it delivered to the U.S. Marshal's office ordering them to enforce it.

Kathy thought about the article for a moment. It seemed to have two

very different elements it was reporting on. Why would free women run away from a job that paid a living wage for the time period? It seems like they would have simply quit, and then moved north since the Industrial Revolution offered better jobs...Kathy paused. But they weren't better jobs, were they? They were just higher paying ones, with the same lack of advancement. She was also very sure that most of the jobs were targeted at men; in particular white men; not black women from the South.

It wasn't until WWII that women began working at these jobs en-masse. These women from the article would not have left their jobs, not without a good reason. That meant they weren't runaways, they were really missing persons. They were misreported, because they were black, despite the fact that their white boss had tried to bring attention to their disappearance. But why was no one listening? The women were free, they would have sent word to *'biss-off'* and no one could have done a thing about it, but they didn't. Something happened to them, something bad, and it was connected to the Caine's.

The last written quote from the dressmaker was that a Caine cousin had later bought the dress shop at a bargain basement price, and she still suspected some sort of terrible conspiracy. In the following paragraph, the reporter then questioned the dressmaker's sanity.

Kathy frowned. If the reporter thought the woman was nuts, why did he include her statement at all? The media has control over what it puts out. Why would they even bother with a source they can't justify? The public would stop buying...She paused as a memory popped up. She stifled a bit of emotion. No, she thought...It couldn't be...Was the reporter reporting the truth, but in a manner that the white readers would buy? She reread the article, this time from a fresh perspective. Was this article designed to get more sources to contact him? Sources who would know the shop owner wasn't nuts, and hopefully report on the whereabouts of the missing African-American women. Was it a way to give unassuming black women, one's who were missing in 1866, the front page?

Kathy smiled and once again pulled out the paper with the blurb regarding Percy being arrested for trafficking. One thing was for sure, the beginning of the Civil War, marked the end of the media puff-pieces for the Caine family. The media sharks could smell Caine blood in the water, but

lacked the evidence to go after the whole story and maintain credibility. After all, it was the shop owner, and not the reporter, who had accused the Caine's of something sinister.

She sighed, and set the articles down. The media, whether current or the 1800's, was difficult for her to understand. Her own experience with the modern media was spotty at best. During her time on the force she had given statements to the media regarding homicide scenes. When she would watch the news later she often wondered if something didn't happen after she left, because what was reported and what had happened, in reality, were two very different incidents! Were they hoping someone would call and correct them? Now that she thought back on it, more than one reporter had forwarded her tips, which had resulted in the arrest of more than a few murder suspects. She definitely had a love-hate relationship with them. Her experience was so sketchy with them it made her leery of taking these articles at face value.

It could also be true that someone in the media was lying about the Caine's. They could be slanting the facts to complement their career versus reporting what really happened. However, whether it was someone in 1811, 1848, 1866, or six months ago was anyone's guess. And, how to figure that out now, was also anyone's guess. The articles were all written by different reporters and in different decades, so that alone would rule out an angry, or suspicious editor or paper owner who had turned against the Caine's. Instead, it would suggest they were a politically powerful family and people were afraid to report the truth about them.

Kathy packed up her stuff, paid the tab, and headed back out to the plantation, to be there in time for the cabinet delivery and to meet with the contractor. She smiled, and had a definite bounce to her step as she walked to the car. Dilapidated or not, she finally had her own house, and as a bonus, she had a historical mystery to keep her occupied.

She wondered if any of the descendants from the earlier newspaper reporters still lived around here. Perhaps they would have a few old family stories or journals. She was sure reporters were the sort who kept journals; with the rest of the story in them. Perhaps they would be willing to share them.

The Chief of Police, Jason Rose, stared at the display cases at the town's small museum. He tucked his pen behind his ear. Its white tube stood out in stark contrast to his close-cut, dark brown hair.

The curator, Sandy Brown had a heartbroken look on her face. He felt bad for her, but couldn't help but feel glad to get away from Mike's constant rattling on about meeting this new 'chick', as he so flippantly phrased it, the woman who had bought the Caine Plantation. He knew what Mike was pushing for and he simply didn't want to meet anyone right now. Relationships and him just didn't mix. He only seemed to attract one loony after another, and he was tired of dealing with them.

He turned his attention back to the case at hand. He watched Mike take pictures of the scene. It was the worst case of vandalism he had seen since becoming an officer. All of the display cases had been smashed, and glass was scattered everywhere. Priceless items were broken, and who-knows-what was missing. Other things were spray painted, lime green or hot pink. Muddy footprints were everywhere. It was clear, this wasn't a simple theft. Someone was trying their best to snuff out this history, or cover up something else by causing all this other damage. Regardless, it was a horrifying loss of historical knowledge.

"We didn't get any alarm calls last night," Jason said, still trying to take in the level of destruction. A Chitimacha bow from 1886, was broken in half, and the pieces stuck into the face of the expensive wax dummy of the Chitimacha Chief which had been holding the bow. They were one of the local Native American Tribes. He shook his head in disgust, who would do such a thing to these artifacts?

Sandy took in a quivering breath, "I didn't set it. We have had so many problems with it going off falsely over the last week that I didn't want to risk a citation for having too many false alarms in a six month period."

Mike shrugged, "Coulda been the burglar-vandal setting off the alarm trying to test the police response to the alarm by repeatedly setting it off."

Sandy covered her mouth, "That never occurred to me."

Jason nodded. Too bad she hadn't set the alarm, he thought. It would have at least given them a time frame. He would have to go back over the call sheets from the last few weeks, and see if there was a pattern in the false alarms that might give him some insight into the timing. Then he could pull the tapes from the gas station across the street and see how much of the museum parking lot could be seen in their security cameras.

Poor Sandy had worked so hard on these displays. She had been particularly proud of this new section dedicated to exposing the history of African Americans in the Deep South, both the good and the bad parts. She had it set up to show the obvious oppression and they worked up to the some of the more current and prominent African-American families who had become community leaders. One of the descendants of the Rainier slaves was now the Parrish Sheriff, and a Caine slave descendant had been the local high school principal, leading the district to the number two spot in the state for academic achievement.

He looked down at the twisted metal of the Dark Lady's display case. It had been smashed, probably with a sledge hammer. This case had held one of the most notorious items in the town's history. It was the whipping post that the Dark Lady had been chained to and whipped to death on. It was quite a noteworthy piece, in fact her blood stains had still been on it. He shook his head, *God, who would want such a thing!*

Lauren Grayson had been upset with Sandy, because the display seemed to contradict some of the so-called facts in Lauren's local history book. Up until then the two of them had been bosom buddies. But sales of her book had plummeted after the reopening of the museum. They had a falling out when Lauren found the copies of her book that were supposed to be in the gift shop, in the store room. He moved that nutter, Lauren, up on his list of suspects. Why was it that everything brewed around that witch, but it seemed it was never her fault? Somehow she always managed to snake her way out of trouble.

He almost hated Lauren, but could she have done this? He would have to find a way to diplomatically question her. She still seemed to be hopelessly in love with him, which meant he was probably the only person who could get away with simply asking her. Now all he had to do was find the courage to be nice to her for five minutes. He sighed, perhaps not. She

would only lie anyway. He would send Sergeant Saline to talk to her. She used to be fond of him, but in a grandfatherly way, not a crazed stalker way.

He looked at poor Sandy's watery eyes. "Mike is going to dust for prints, and send everything to the crime lab for processing. With all this glass, I am hoping that perhaps we can get a decent fingerprint, or something," Jason said, trying to sound sympathetic.

He doubted they would get one usable print, tourists touched everything here. There would be overlapping prints everywhere, from everyone who had visited the museum. Even if Lauren's prints were found here, it wouldn't mean anything, since she was the town historian. Finding her prints at the historical display would hardly be enough evidence to convince a judge to sign a warrant.

Mike nodded, and started taking a round of close up photos.

The curator walked over to the quilt display. "At least the Dark Lady's purple quilt wasn't taken, or vandalized."

"Now, where exactly was the whipping post displayed," Jason asked.

"Right here," she pointed. "The lawyers had donated it back when they renovated the stable into a garage, but, we only put it out six months ago. We didn't put it out then before because it seemed like such a controversial piece. Recently the board decided that history should be true, so out it went. People came from all over to learn about this new display. As dark as its past is, it was lighting up the future. So many people in town had come together for this display. Their work had helped build strong, positive racial bridges in the community, and now the display is destroyed." Her eyes glassed over.

Jason looked at the old, yellowing purple quilt. His mother was an avid quilter and had joined the '*Block of the Month*' quilt guild when they replicated a quilt that matched Dark Lady's. She had one half finished in her stash of historical quilting projects. "Do you have a list of the items?"

"I need to get my inventory list, in order to perform a full inventory. Can I give you a full list in a few days?" Sandy said, a tear escaping from her eye. She hastily wiped it away, looking at the floor.

"We'll see what we can do to get the items back. Meanwhile, I'll broadcast the partial list we have. The post itself will certainly stand out, no matter what the burglar intends to do with it."

"Thank you Chief. It's easier to remember history when it's in front of your face, and cannot be glossed over, or spun to have another meaning. We have to get this display back together. It's on the tours from Gulf Port, MS, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans. It provides a lot of income for us, and the town."

"I understand," Jason said nodding. It was true. The museum might be small, but it was a very big draw for much needed tourist dollars. They had to get that display back

THE NEXT QUILT IS RED

Phil and his crew had been grateful to run across this last minute kitchen job. Business had been dry for so long, he was starting to worry, but not anymore. Not only that, but every day they had worked here, a wonderful spread of food for lunch had been laid out for them. They were now two weeks into the job, while Ms. Marconi had gone back up north to take care of some personal business. Thankfully the drywall went up easily, and all the cabinets besides one. The plumbing was only thing in the room that was pre-installed. Appliances and trim was all that was needed now. Then he could enjoy his bonus, and she could paint and decorate as she desired on any squeezed, city-girl, time frame she wanted.

Right now though, he was pissed off, because he was alone here. About twenty minutes after lunch his crew had run screaming from the house and left, nearly running the gate down with the truck, before one of the fools could get it open. Then they had somehow managed to get that heap to peel out of the driveway. Then they had the nerve to text him, from down the road, stating they weren't coming back...Ever.

He had started to text them back, as he nibbled on a sandwich from the daily spread. It had been the first time he had eaten anything from the house. Usually he only ate what his wife packed for him, because there were just certain benefits to eating what she gave him, and not tossing it out for the gourmet stuff Ms. Marconi had sent to them every day. For example, this way he could go home and honestly describe how good his wife's lunch was. She would be happy with him, and if she was happy, then it was easier

for him to be happy.

"That's not for the overseer!" A harsh voice came from behind him.

Phil's eyes widened, as he spun around to face a pretty, but very petite African American lady. She looked barely five feet tall, and couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. However the look on her face suggested she was over six feet tall, and muscle bound. This woman had a command presence like nothing he had ever seen, and that impressed him, especially since he had been in the Army for five years and seen his fair share of drill sergeants.

"Overseer? Sorry, Lady I didn't realize anyone else was here? Have you been the one feeding my crew while we've been here? I'll say 'thank you' from them personally for them. They have carried on the whole time about what wonderful food there is here."

"That was meant for the field hands only," she said, crossing her arms, and giving him a hard look.

"Field hands?"

"Yes, Mistress wants a new kitchen so I must tolerate strangers in my house, but I will not tolerate people questioning me. Please leave, if you are finished." She motioned her right hand toward the kitchen door.

"I just have to secure this bottom cabinet, and then these last pieces of trim." *Was she wearing a Belle gown and slave collar? And who in the world calls the homeowner Mistress?*

"Get on with it then."

"No need to be rude. I'll knock it out and leave." *Bitch.*

"Fine, when you see Mistress again, let her know the next quilt is red. She must rush over to it."

He nodded, finished, and left without further comment from the woman, but she glared at him the entire time, and then glared at him out the front window as he left. *What a psycho!*

He was still pissed at his crew. They had let a snotty maid endanger a thirty-five thousand dollar job, not to mention the timing bonus! He would have a thing or two to say to them when he got back to the shop. The economy was still rough, and he couldn't allow a bad review from the owner of a house like that hurt his own economic recovery. However, he would also have something to say to Ms. Marconi when she returned. He did not appreciate being spoken to like that by her assistant.

Field hands, Mistresses, and overseers! Indeed!

Kathy had made up her mind. The slow, friendly pace of life was simply too alluring. As far as she was concerned, it was just what the doctor ordered. She was happy to be...she smiled...*home*. She pulled into the shopping center by the interstate. She needed to pick up a few things.

To help matters out, back in New York, her building superintendent knew of a couple who wanted to buy her apartment. Since her building was fully occupied and the couple knew at least half of the co-op board she was able to get top dollar for it right away. The money she made from the sale would take care of all of the renovations she wanted to do at the plantation, and leave a bit extra. The best part of the deal was that if she fully restored it to historical standards, and later found herself missing Manhattan she could sell the plantation for enough money to buy a bigger apartment back home. It was a win-win for Kathy.

The flight back had been smooth. She had packed up her apartment, and secured a moving company who should be here soon. Meanwhile the construction workers had installed the major components of the kitchen. According to a text she received only a few things, appliances included, remained. The painters had fixed the porch and prepped the outside of the house for painting while she was gone. They would be ready to start painting the front of the house tomorrow. The new roof had also been completed last week. Next week she would have to find some landscape guys to start on the landscaping. She had given the painters carte blanche to simply remove everything against the house. It was all overgrown anyway, and besides, their fee for removing it was far better than the landscape guys were sure to charge.

For the exterior color, she had chosen a Historical Society approved yellow. In fact, Lauren had been thrilled. Kathy was still leery of her, despite the fact that she was being nice. There was still something off about her. Perhaps it was just a lingering bad first impression? Still, every time Kathy turned around Lauren was there. It was getting annoying, almost like a stalker.

Although, Kathy had to admit, Lauren had really turned on the Southern Belle charm to get replacing the heating and cooling units moved up on the priority list of the other contractor. She had also been the driving force behind Kathy's decision to restore the old ceiling fans on the porches. The contractor was able to rig something in the attic to make them mechanical, but still look like the old 1810 fans. She couldn't wait to see how they turned out. Fireplace inspection was next on her list.

The other rooms would all be getting new stuff, but for now, they were all on the back burner. Only the wallpaper restoration had been moved up on the list of priorities. The teal peacock paper was special and she wanted to keep it, if possible. It wasn't even close to her style, but something was drawing her to it.

She went into the bookstore first. She was looking for any local history books. As she walked in she thought perhaps she would also check out the books in the home décor section.

She had decided that she wanted to stay in the South, even if she sold this house. She could get a Starbucks coffee at the Target that anchored the shopping center, so she wasn't entirely out of luck. She smiled, and got in line with her books. Then it was off to Target.

She checked out, and went to Target with her list in hand. Joy was slowly returning to her life.

Jack and Ramón were very happy to be a day early! This would qualify them for the bonus she had promised.

Yes!

Jack knew that having Ramón with him on the job would be an asset. Ramón was not afraid to drive long distances at night. That dude would drive pineapples to Hawaii, if there was a road.

Jack texted Ms. Marconi, of their arrival. She texted back that she was about twenty-five minutes from them, that the front door was unlocked, and to go in and help themselves to the cooler. Mike's wife had packed it for her, and he had dropped it off for her. But, the delivery guys wouldn't know all that. It would make them feel good to have something waiting for them. Delivery guys who felt good were very high on Kathy's list of people to please, especially if they had a truckload of her stuff.

Jack and Ramón entered the house and found a rough map of which boxes matched the rooms she wanted them in. The cooler was waiting on the staircase.

Jack looked at Ramón "Ever been on a real plantation?"

He shook his head. "No, we're black, black men don't necessarily think about vacationing at southern sugar cane plantations."

"You aren't interested in the history?"

"No, let's just get started." Ramón picked up a water bottle and cheese stick. He stared at the ugly peacock wallpaper, making a face. "What a money pit!" he said, turning, and heading back out to the truck. "This place is unfinished at best!"

"Yeah, ugly, but it's cool that she left us snacks," Jack said, agreeing with Ramón's assessment of the interior of the house. Good thing the weather was nice here! There was no way Codes back home would let anyone live in a house like this in the middle of winter. Not that anyone in their right mind would want to.

Ramón nodded, taking a swig of his water. "It's so hot here!"

"Hey, I am not complaining, better this than the thirty degrees we had when we left home. And really, sixty-five degrees, isn't hot. You're just not used to it right now."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Come on, let's earn that bonus. I promised my wife a vacation, and this extra will put me over the top. Waikiki Beach, Baby! Crossing it off the bucket list in three months." He held up two fingers.

They loaded up their dolly with a bunch of boxes that were marked for the master bedroom, and then lumbered up the stairs as best they could without scratching anything. Not that anyone would have noticed if they did. Well, no one living would have noticed.

"Over here," Jack said, pointing to a sign taped to the wall that read *Boxes here*.

They carefully set the boxes down by the sign. When they turned to start out of the room they saw the hem of a white dress with pink rose buds on it. It draped around the door jamb, as whomever the dress belonged to left the room.

"Hey, Miss Lady," Ramón called. He jogged over, and looked out into the mezzanine, but no one was there. "It must be nice to be rich. This room here is the same size as my whole apartment."

"Miss Lady?" Jack called, pulling the dolly behind him. He walked out of the master bedroom, and into the second bedroom, but no one was there either. "And, this room is bigger than your apartment too."

"Hello!" Ramón called again. There was no answer. "We did see someone, didn't we? Didn't she say she was still about a half-hour out?"

"Probably twenty minutes now," Jack paused, as he caught a glimpse of the draping of the dress as it rounded the staircase. Whoever she was, she was headed downstairs. "Yes, we did see something."

They headed back down the stairs, but again, saw no one. They both had previous experience with odd-shy clients before, so they shrugged it off, reloaded the dolly, and headed back up the stairs.

"Hey!" Jack said aloud, looking at the boxes they had brought up earlier. They were scattered, albeit neatly, all over the room. "You can't be moving stuff around yet! Our liability insurance won't cover it." Not to mention, it

never went well with the boss when the evaluations came in with clients noting they had to help the movers. He wasn't the one going to Waikiki, but that didn't mean he had no plans for the bonus money, and he wanted every dime of it.

"Miss Lady!" Ramón called out. "What's her name?"

"Kathy Marconi. There!" Jack said, pointing, her dress draping down the staircase, again. "She runs up and down the stairs all day?" He shrugged.

They both took off after her. Jack wasn't going to be docked, or sued, out of his bonus because some nightgown-wearing, old, retired lady wanted to move around some boxes that were too heavy for her.

"Ms. Marconi! Stop!" They said, in unison.

They left the dolly, and followed her downstairs, but she was gone.

"Oh! No way! Miss Marconi!" Jack called out, heading into the kitchen. He was getting annoyed with her.

"This is almost as bad, as that crazy dick, who wanted us to stack his boxes a ruler width apart, and then denied the bonus because we used a plastic ruler and not a wooden one." Ramón started to follow him, but as he turned the corner he saw an African American woman in the dining room. "Hold on." But Jack kept going.

She was wearing the white rose bud dress, and wore a silver slave collar around her neck.

"What the!" He knew things were different in the South for his race, but slave collars! It seemed to him that would have warranted an Al Sharpton march, at the minimum; or riots at the maximum.

"The next quilt is red!" she said. Blood red tears ran down her face, as she simultaneously charged at him while evaporating into a cold black fog just inches from his face.

All Ramón could see before she disappeared was a white cheek bone sticking out of an open wound. He ran, screaming from the house.

"Oh! Hell no! Voodoo!" He jumped over the porch steps, and hit the ground running. He locked himself in the truck, cursing at the fact that Jack had the keys which was good for Jack, because he would have drove off and left him with that ghost bitch. He could go to Waikiki next year.

Meanwhile, Jack found the open pantry door in the kitchen. "As soon as she gets the appliances in here at least one room will be livable." He made his way up the narrow staircase to the third floor. "Hey...New utilities! She really is going to live here."

A heavy sadness filled his heart as he looked down the rows of the empty slave quarters. He covered his mouth, squeezing his cheeks. He had never been to the South. His ancestors had come north with the Industrial Revolution, and stayed there. He was a fifth generation freight hauler, in the Northeast. He stared at the beds for a moment. He wondered if his ancestors had lived in quarters like this. Actually, he corrected his train of thought; this would have been the house slaves, so this would have been considered a serious upgrade from the field hands' living conditions.

He was startled as he realized a little African American boy was sitting on the ledge of the far dormer window. His simple pants were tied with what looked like twine.

"Hey, Little Mister. Have you seen Ms. Marconi?" he asked, stepping cautiously toward the little boy. Jack could only see his profile in this light. He was a weird little kid, just sitting there. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was off about him.

The boy turned to face him. He squinted in the attic's dim light, holding up his cell phone to chase away a bit of the darkness that seemed to have surrounded him.

"There is no mo' time. The red quilt has been hung. It is too late," the boy said, staring at Jack with blank dead white eyes.

"Hey, what is going on here?" Was this kid blind? Those eyes!

"You'd betta get ba'k to the cane, b'fore the overseer catches you inna girls' room. He'll whip ya bloody for bein' here. Just warn Mistress, there is no mo' time! She'll hav' to look at it ba'kwords"

"Nobody's whipping me anything, without a fight. And, blacks don't...uhh...do whatever it was we...once did with sugar cane." He didn't have a clue what he was saying. He couldn't grow strawberries on a window ledge planter for his daughter, let alone a field of sugar cane. Then it occurred to him, had he just been threatened...by a little blind kid...with a whipping? "I don't know a darn thing about farming, kid." What was he saying? It sounded idiotic. It was the eyes, the eyes were distracting him. No. They were disturbing him. He couldn't take his own eyes off the boy's eyes.

The boy started crying blood red tears. "Massa has a razor whip, an' he's coming for Granny," he said as he faded, and then finally disappeared into a black fog.

Jack froze momentarily. His own blood turning to ice as the chill of fear ran through him like electricity. He screamed, and nearly fell down the narrow staircase trying to get out of the house.

When Kathy pulled up, in her new pickup truck she found Jack and Ramón locked in the cab of their delivery truck, refusing to get out. Jack lowered the window about an inch, and told her what happened.

"What does that mean? Too Late for what? The next quilt is red? What quilt?" Kathy asked. "What did you spike your water bottles with?" Then she remembered the YouTube video. First thing tomorrow morning she was calling Mike to see if he could help find out what this meant. It had a profound meaning to someone, and it was starting to sound like a life or death situation.

"We ain't drinking!" Ramón said, still wide-eyed. The real Ms. Marconi was much different than he thought. It was like talking to a cop! There was something about the tone of her voice, and the way she stood by the driver's window. He half expected her to ask Jack for his license and registration.

Jack shook his head. "Don't know what it means, and I don't care! Look Miss Marconi, We'll give up the bonus for being early. You can keep the dolly. We'll leave everything on the porch, but we ain't...goin'...back in

there!" He used a surety in his voice that he had never used with a client before. He lowered the window another inch.

Ramón shook his head in disagreement. "Man, I don't wanna get out of the truck. Let's just go. We can ship it to her."

"Come on...It's only six hundred square feet of stuff, let's just knock it out!" Jack said, as he got out of the truck.

Reluctantly Ramón followed him, mumbling something about crazy dead bitches.

Forty-five minutes later, everything Kathy owned was on the porch, and she was watching the tail lights of the truck leave. She couldn't believe this had just happened! They nearly killed themselves getting here a day early, and then gave up the bonus without so much as a whimper, let alone a decent argument. It didn't make any sense to Kathy.

The only thing that stopped her from calling the company and giving them an earful was the genuine fear on the men's faces. She could also hear it in their voices when they told her what happened. She didn't believe their stories of course, but she did believe something had happened to them. Now she needed to find out what. Their story kind of matched Mike's story on Ethan, and the Dark Lady. And that YouTube video was starting to freak her out. What was the red quilt for? She held up her tablet and walked around the porch. *Damn, no Wi-Fi.* She had a cell signal though. Perhaps she would check it out later?

Then she remembered, the lawyer who had died of a heart attack had also mentioned a quilt, as had the former kitchen contractors.

She looked at the mess on the porch and let the thought of quilts drift from her mind. She spent the rest of the afternoon dragging everything into the house piece by piece, even breaking down some items, so she could get them into the house by herself. She was beginning to change her mind about complaining to the company. This was just too much work for one person, and she had paid to have the furniture actually put into the house. However, having the dolly at her disposal would be useful during the rest of the renovation, and it was an industrial-strength one, so it was high end, for a dolly.

She took a break, and texted Mike about the movers. "Maybe I'll find out what the red quilt means today, and not tomorrow," She said, pressing send.

He texted her back, "I think I have an answer, but you're not going to like it. Trying to talk Jason into coming to talk to you about it."

"OK," she texted back.

Wasn't Jason the Chief of Police? What did he want with her? She supposed she would find out when he got there. That was if Mike could talk him into coming.

She went back to fiddling around with her boxes.

She had hoped to stay here tonight, because she had given up her motel room prior to returning to New York. Everything was in such disorder at her house. She figured it would be uncomfortable to stay here with things in this condition. This was such a small town, and she figured she could probably just show up at the motel without too much of an issue. She bet the room would still be available. It wasn't like people were making reservations at a major tourist attraction.

Tomorrow the appliances and cable were coming, so she had to be here all day. That would take care of the Wi-Fi issue. Perhaps she should drag her mattress into the living room, and sleep in there tonight? But first things first, that bathroom needed cleaning. She headed upstairs with her new cleaning supplies and scrubbed it as clean as it was going to get.

She looked out over the mezzanine balcony at the open gate; no one was coming. "I suppose they changed their mind." She went downstairs and grabbed her keys to go lock it, making a note to remember to get a remote for the gate...Tomorrow.

As she stepped out on the front porch, she saw a patrol car pull up the drive. It wasn't Mike. *Must be Jason?*

A dark haired, handsome officer got out. The family resemblance to Mike was unmistakable. Kathy also recognized the star cluster on his shoulder lapel. She smiled, hadn't Mike said Jason wasn't married?

"Chief," she said, nodding. Now here was someone she could sink her teeth into! No Mikey-high school looks left in this one. He was all Cajun grown man.

He smiled. "I am Jason Rose. Mike said you are a retired homicide detective from the NYPD."

"Yes, I'm Kathy Marconi," she said, smiling, "Mike told me about you too."

"Yes, he is my little brother."

"He's a nice kid. Come in," she offered.

"Actually, I was hoping to borrow your skills. We have a homicide case on our hands. I have never seen anything like it. I was wondering if I could pick your brains, since you have seen so many. We've only had five in the last seventeen years. And four of them had a crying family member leaning over the body, apologizing for killing them."

"Sure," Kathy said, feeling a bit let down. *Darn, he couldn't just sweep me off my feet, and help me move the heavy stuff upstairs,* "Just let me change quickly. I have been moving things all afternoon."

Jason nodded and smiled. To him, she didn't look old enough to be retired, despite her former Captain verifying her as a retired detective in his unit. Mike was right, beautiful, but there was more to her story than what she just told him.

She darted up the stairs, thankful that her wardrobe boxes had made it upstairs before Jack and Ramón had crapped their pants, and ran away. She quickly changed, refreshed in the bathroom, pausing to note how awful it still was, and then darted back down the stairs.

She was nervous. She had seen every sort of killing she thought possible, but when she retired she dismissed the idea of ever seeing anything like that again, and here she was, headed out to view something horrible that someone had done to someone else. Maybe she had not been tired of the politics. Maybe she was just as sick of seeing the dead bodies of people who should still be living

THE RAZOR WHIP

She rode with Jason to the homicide scene. It seemed like such a long way from her house when one had to drive around all the water ways and canals. It almost would have been faster to walk through her backyard. No wonder the lawyers had a golf cart.

"You know, this whole subdivision used to be part of your plantation," Jason said, unsure what to say to her. He stifled a sigh; there would be plenty to talk about in a minute.

"Yes, Mike mentioned it earlier. These are really nice houses," she said, looking out the window at the brick MacMansions.

"Arthur Caine, put restrictions on the land use when he sold the tracts. Apparently, he didn't want to hurt his own property value, despite the fact that the house had become a rat hole by then," he said, not thinking.

"My house isn't a rat hole," she smiled, but was a bit offended. He had no idea the lengths she had gone to, to get the house in as good of shape as it was now. Although, it still had a very long way to go.

"Oh, sorry, I mean, it was when Arthur lived there. He could have been featured on an episode of *Hoarders*. The library was so horrible that no one could even enter it. It had been that way for decades." His cheeks turned a slight pink.

Kathy smiled. Was he blushing? "Well, it is stripped clean now. Nothing,

but my gorgeous new, rat-less, kitchen."

He offered an awkward grin. "What about the rest of the house? Rat-less?"

"Well, aren't you a charmer," she smirked. He was not as personable as Mike that was for sure.

"Here we are." They pulled up to the address of the crime scene.

"Are there any witnesses?" It didn't escape her notice that this was the house Mike and his wife had passed over, because it smelled like a homicide. It had also had something red hanging outside on the line when she looked out the dormer window that day with Mike.

He shook his head, no. "Mike took the victim's wife to her mother's. She came home, and found him...Well, you'll see how she found him here in a minute. Her boss and co-workers have already verified she was at work at the time of death. So far, the only lead we have is the whipping post. It was stolen from the museum recently. Whoever the burglar was really tore up the museum, smashed almost everything. It will be shut down for nearly a year for repairs. I am betting the whip is from the museum too, but as of yet it isn't on the list," he said, leading her up the front steps.

"Whip," Kathy asked, confused.

"Yes, he was whipped to death. Come on in, it's easier to explain if you just see." He opened the door for her. "The Medical Examiner is ready for him now, but I really wanted your opinion before we let the crime scene go. The victim's name is Milton Lawrence." He led her up the stairs.

He pointed to a little girl's room, "This one calls the police, every weekend that she visits her dad. She cries and carries on about a ghost hiding in the closet. She says, the ghost hides and cries that she led them all to their deaths. She wasn't here though, she lives with her mother." He turned and entered the master bedroom. "This is Milton Lawrence. He was turning thirty-one this weekend."

A man was lying half face down on the bed, and half tied to a whipping post that was obviously put next to the bed after the attack. Kathy knew

this, because, the only blood on it were the smears from where it appeared as though his fingers twitched as he died making small smears. If he had been tied to it as he was whipped, there would be spatter all over it. She expected the medical examiner's report would confirm that this man had suffered blunt force trauma by being whipped to death. She looked closer at the post. It was propped into the corner. It would have turned over if Milton had been in a condition to escape.

"Are these old and new blood stains? Was this used in another crime," she asked, noticing the darker brown stains under the brighter newer ones.

Jason nodded and explained the history behind this post.

"It was from my property?" She half-heartedly pointed at it, making a face.

He nodded grimly. "Not all of the Caine's were Underground Railroad heroes."

She looked up. There was a large V-shaped blood spatter on the ceiling, and another one on the wall, with what looked like an overlapping one over it, but she couldn't be sure. Overlapping patterns were difficult and would require a blood spatter expert, which she was not. However, she knew a lot about them from having worked so many homicide scenes in the past.

"Well, that," she pointed to the spatters, "indicates the victim was alive for most of the beating, since dead bodies don't bleed. See the overlapping streaks? There had been multiple and repeated hits, indicating a great deal of anger at the victim. Strangers don't normally do this, unless they are serial killers. Jesus, whoever did this is sick, sick, sick." Kathy had been on many horrible scenes, but this one was actually making her queasy.

"Multiple and repeated, isn't that the same thing?"

"No, he was struck repeated times," she moved her arm over her head to demonstrate the blows, "in multiple locations in the room," she explained, pointing to the two sets of V-patterns. "The bed is blood soaked were he bled out right here, meaning, he laid there alive, bleeding to death after the beating. But he was unable to move, or free himself from the post." She explained the scene calmly like she was ordering a burger at the

drive through.

She looked at the wounds; part of the spinal cord was exposed. "He would have been paralyzed from the mid-chest down. That would explain the twitching hands, but the Medical Examiner will be able to confirm or better explain it. See the marks here in the blood on the post, it's the nerves twitching. Damn...What sort of whip did this? The level of injury is horrifying, even for me."

She looked at the walls again. "Well, whoever did it, hit the dresser at some point." The dresser sported deep gouge marks on it. It looked like something from a horror film.

Jason bent over and looked at the gouges. "It's called a razor whip."

"This poor guy had a very painful death," Kathy said, feeling sorry for poor Milton. "From what I can tell, there were at least two bouts of whippings, but no bloody footprints, or bloody fingerprints, with the exception of the victim's." She leaned in closer to the spatter on the wall, and looked down the entire length of the pattern. It covered the wall, and draped over the closet door and part of the high boy chest of drawers. It was the longest V pattern she had ever seen.

"Any indication of forced entry?" she asked.

"Nobody locks their doors here. It's the one thing that constantly sets off the false burglar alarms. People come home and simply walk in all the time...Like they forgot they write a check to the alarm company every month."

"Anybody hate him," she asked, ignoring the false alarm reference.

Jason shook his head, no. "The guy has no known enemies. In fact, everyone loves him. He even had a nice divorce. He also mows the grass for the lady across the street while her broken foot heals. Mike was a bit shook up; Milton graduated high school with him back in 2002. That was how I sent him to take Milton's wife to her mother's place."

"She'll have to find someone else to help mow," Kathy said. She looked around the room again. It looked professionally decorated. "This really is a

swanky neighborhood for a beating death. Whoever did this wanted him to feel each and every blow. Look at the deep open wounds on his back, and then here, it looks like one caught his throat. Is the whip still here?"

"Yes, over there," Jason pointed to a whip just out of view, lying by the open window.

She walked over, and looked at it. It had what appeared to be stone arrowheads attached to the business end of the now blood soaked whip. Something outside caught her eye in the waning sunlight. She stood up straight and looked out the window. In the backyard, a red quilt was hanging on the deck railing. She drew in a breath. *Too late! Didn't Jack say the little ghost boy-Ethan told him it was too late! That she would have to work it backwards! Someone knew this was going to happen.*

"I'll be right back." She hurried down the stairs, and out onto the back deck.

Jason was directly behind her, "What is it?"

She stared at the red quilt like it was a ghost. "The next quilt is red," she whispered, as she covered her mouth. "Did you say he graduated in 2002? Mtlaw2002= Milton Lawrence, and the year he graduated high school."

"What?" Jason asked, confused. He was going to be highly disappointed if one more person suggested a ghost killed Milton. It was the sole reason he had even decided to consult with Kathy in the first place.

"My movers were terrified by an African American woman and little boy today. They claimed they were ghosts. They told the movers, to warn 'them' that it was too late; the next quilt was red."

"What? Warn who? Who is 'them'," Jason asked, sounding skeptical, as he eyed the quilt. "No statements with 'them' being a party, ever, turned out to be credible. You mean, someone tried to report this, this afternoon?"

Kathy shook her head no, "Someone tried to warn him when he was fourteen. He didn't upload the video until later." She took out her tablet, and played the video for him. Milton Lawrence had been the cameraman.

He stood there stunned for a moment. "Jesus. What about the movers? They are from New York, aren't they? They don't even know Milton. Could they have known he made that video?"

"I don't know. I just thought they were just afraid of a rumored haunted house, or were using it as an excuse to just dump my stuff on the front porch, and run. What they said to me didn't even make sense, until now." She frowned at the quilt. She felt a sudden rush of guilt that she didn't call the police sooner. It just seemed so illogical, and not of an emergency nature. What would she have said? *Hello police, the next quilt is red, come lights and siren!* She would have sounded like a lunatic. And, where would she have sent them, even if she had called? *Oh by the way, you can just run around town, lights and siren blaring until you find a red quilt flying!* It was nuts.

"If that ever happens to you again, please call me at once." He was obviously suspicious at the idea of out-of-towners having that much information about someone they had never met in a town they had never been to.

"Yes, of course," Kathy nodded. "What does that mean: 'The next quilt is red?' Are there any old, unsolved murders that feature a red quilt as evidence?"

"Aside from this one? None that I am aware of, but I will check out some of the older cases. I know the plantation was involved in the Underground Railroad, and sometimes they used different quilts to communicate. Some let the runaways know they were safe, while others warned them to avoid the plantation," he said, trying to remember the history. "My mother is the quilter, not me. I'll have to call her, or look it up later on to see how it worked. She has studied it extensively. Personally I don't put much stock in it."

Kathy nodded, she was sure some of the research she had found back when she was a college student suggested that the quilt theory was bogus, because there was no way to verify what the quilts meant. However, she was used to dealing with vague evidence, and just because something couldn't be verified didn't mean it was a lie, or useless information. It just meant that it was something you couldn't put in front of a jury, and wouldn't that be the whole point of secret code? To keep it secret?

If trafficking logic served her correct, only the guide who led the slaves to freedom needed to know what the patterns and colors of the quilts meant. If the network was to be secure, each plantation had to have its own code, or the hunters could easily ascertain where the line ran. If the code was known by too many it would be like driving along the interstate with clearly marked rest-stops, which would defeat the purpose of a secret trafficking network. The hunters wouldn't have to work; they would just have to wait. The idea that it was published was dangerously ludicrous.

The Underground Railroad would have had to have operatives as good as any of today's CIA agents. They would only need a few '*agents*', and in fact, the fewer the better. Once the agent was in place, then the runaways were on a *need-to-know* or *eyes-only* basis. Therefore, the quilt theory was quite plausible. The runaways could remain in the dark as to the code, and still be led along the Railroad using the quilts, or anything else that could be hung on a clothesline, or set out to roast on a fire. They need only follow the orders of the '*agent*'. That way, if captured, they couldn't give away secrets, because only the agent would have the information. They could have used anything or everything, but the point was, they had to use something. The Caine's must have used quilts so the operatives could direct the runaways safely.

She looked at the exquisite hand stitching on the quilt. "What do you suppose the quilt means? Red, could be a warning? Too hot, as in not safe to enter." She tried to think of all the different meanings people attached to the color red; love, anger, danger, warning, stop, fight. It probably meant stay away.

Jason appeared to be thinking the same thing as he shrugged, "I am not sure. The people coordinating the runaways didn't write books on how to run the Railroad. I am sure if the slaves could write, they certainly wouldn't have written that information down. It would have compromised the entire operation. The slaves may have been illiterate as a majority, but they weren't stupid. Besides, when the Caine family first built the house, the Underground Railroad didn't exist in the same form that it did just prior to the Civil War, so the details are even sketchier. It didn't get up, and running, as you would know it from History class, until the 1850's. Please. Tell me, you aren't suggesting the ghost of a runaway slave killed him because he

hung a red quilt out to dry?" A look of disappoint flashed across his face.

She looked at little white patch on the quilt that had a rosebud design on it. "No, of course not. I have been on the scene of many deaths, and have never seen any ghosts. I have been all over my newly renovated...rat-less, home...alone, and have yet to see any ghosts there," Kathy turned to face him. "However, everyone in town seems to be familiar with both the sinister, and puff-piece Caine stories. So...The question we need to answer is; who would take advantage of that knowledge to kill Mr. Lawrence? Another interesting tidbit of information that would be useful to know is the health of the marriage. If it was healthy, did Mrs. Lawrence have a stalker who would want Mr. Lawrence out of the way? And, what about the broken-foot lady? Perhaps there is someone out there who didn't appreciate him helping her?"

He was relieved. She wasn't being irrational. She was just acknowledging the influence of it on the case. "Hummm, I never thought to consider a jilted lover. In fact, Milton's new wife, Ellen, had another lover long before she married Lawrence here. That dude used to beat the Holy crap out of her. She left him more than five years ago. They had been high school lovers, but haven't been together in a long time. She and Milton have been married two years." Jason shrugged.

"What is the suspect doing now?"

"I don't know. He moved away, haven't seen him since. He spent his 90 days in jail for beating her, and then high-tailed it out of town, because no one would hire him. But, as I said that was five years ago."

Kathy nodded, if the case was that old, she doubted it was the ex-lover. "Well, I know one thing."

"What's that?"

"That whip is real. Ghosts, not that I believe in them, are non-temporal."

Jason nodded in agreement. "So, our suspect is very real. Good, finally someone who didn't suggest one of the Caine's or Ridely the Whipper had come back from the dead! I was seriously going to suspend the next one of

my officers that suggested it. Or, at least, assign them to parade-parking duty, for a decade."

"Ya'll done?" The Medical Examiner's assistant asked, poking his head out to the deck, but pointing upstairs.

Kathy nodded.

"Sure," Jason said, leading Kathy out. "Just make sure the Sheriff's crime scene processors are finished."

They started driving back to Kathy's.

"You know," Kathy said, "I would be more interested in knowing why Ramón and Jack knew about the red quilt, and what they are holding back. We should see if they are still in town." She simply didn't believe in ghosts. Someone had tried to warn them to call the police, but they didn't understand! The message was too convoluted and cryptic.

Jason shook his head, no. "Mike cited them for speeding on the way out of town. Do you think they might've had something to do with it? Two men would have the strength to cause those injuries. How would they get the stuff from the burglary two weeks ago?"

This time it was Kathy who shook her head, "No, they were in New York until two days ago, it's nearly a two day drive here. They were also terrified when I arrived home. They wouldn't have had enough time to do all that, and then get back to my house, and take two loads upstairs. They were locked in their truck, crapping themselves, when I arrived. You should have seen their eyes. I seriously doubt they are anything more than unwilling witnesses. And then, as you said, Mike cited them as they left town. We basically have some sort of sight on them from the moment they arrived to the moment they left. The unaccounted for time wasn't long enough to kill Lawrence like that, and then stage the scene to look like a murder that happened over a hundred and fifty years ago. Someone is sending a message."

"Do you remember exactly what they said," he asked.

"They said the ghosts told them to 'warn *them* time was up, and that the

next quilt was red'. The little boy even told Jack he should get back to the cane fields before he got whipped bloody for being in the girls' room." She believed them. "I know primal fear when I see it. Meaning something had to have happened to the movers. They were being hysterical. Had there been a killer in my house and he left a message there? Maybe it was a terrified witness running to warn someone?"

"Warn who? Who is *them*? What does that mean?" Jason asked. He was getting frustrated.

"I don't know. Come to think of it, Jack texted me, so I still have his number. Perhaps we should call him?"

Jason nodded. A few minutes later they pulled up Kathy's drive. "Do you mind if we call from inside," he asked, parking, and picking up his clipboard.

"Are you kidding? You really know how to show a gal a good time. What sort of date would I be if I didn't ask you into my rat-less home after that fabulous night out?" Her mind was reeling with ideas about what could have led to poor Mr. Lawrence's murder. Hopefully it wouldn't give her nightmares! It seemed like she always had nightmares for a few days after the really bad cases, and a case that involved someone being whipped to death would certainly qualify as a bad one.

He smiled, glancing away. "Gotta love that homicide humor."

They got out, and he followed her in.

Twenty-five minutes later, he wasn't smiling anymore. Instead, he was sitting at the enormous, scruffy-looking dining room table, scribbling little circles on his notepad. A hysterical Jack was still babbling into the phone about the little boy with the bleeding, dead eyeballs. No matter what he was asked he just kept repeating the same story, over and over! Jason leaned his head on his hand, like it was too loaded up with Jack's panic for him to keep it up straight.

Kathy held her hand out, and whispered, "I have worked with panicked victims and witnesses before, let me try."

He nodded, handing the phone to her.

"Hello, Jack. It's Kathy Marconi, the retired detective, remember?" she said, in a soft, patient tone. "I know that had to be a terrifying event, but someone is dead...in reality, not as a ghost...Chief Rose needs your help. I need you to rest, calm down, and please write out a statement. Can you have it emailed to Chief Rose in the morning?"

There was a pause.

"Thank you. Now please, find a way to relax and get a good night's sleep....What?...No... I am a homicide detective, ghosts don't talk to me. They never have. Trust me, if ghosts wanted justice, talking to a homicide detective would be the simplest way to get it. Try to concentrate on a description of the little boy, and include that in your statement. Please, just don't worry, and relax...Thank you...You have a good night too, Jack, don't worry about the moving evaluation. I've got you covered." She hung up the phone, and set it down on the table, making a *ta-dah* motion.

"Thank you, I owe you." Jason smiled brightly, but again avoided eye contact with her.

"You can pay me back right now. That mattress and box spring need to go upstairs," Kathy said, pointing. She had already taken the frame up, it was light. She really didn't want to sleep in the living room tonight.

"No problem." He jumped up to help her, grabbing the front half of the mattress.

Once upstairs, he helped her get the bed set up, and then sat down next to her on it.

"You look awfully young to be retired?" He looked her up and down. She was very sexy, and according to her driver's license she was thirty-seven. "You are two years younger than me, and I am confused at how, or more to the point, why you are retired.

She smiled, and repeated the same statement she had said to Mike about starting young in a twenty an out profession, but it was quickly apparent that the elder Rose was a bit better at digging than his younger brother.

"That...is the Cliff's Notes version, but what's the novel version?" He smiled, kindly, but his tone suggested that he wanted an answer, a real answer.

"Sounds like you have done some homework," Kathy said, forcing a smile, and hoping it did not look fake or forced.

He pointed to the stars on his shoulder. "Chief...That means I do background checks on people before they go to my scenes. Your Captain seems to think highly of you. Your employment checked out okay, so what gives? And please...Don't try to slide me the same hockey puck you did Mike."

"Hockey Puck?" Kathy almost laughed.

"Yes, for lack of a more colorful term in front of a lady."

She snorted, and laughed, clapping her hands. Yes, she could sink her teeth into him...All night long for that matter. He was hot and adorable to boot! "Hockey puck!"

"Does the name Randal Bell ring any bells?" He didn't want to make her angry, but he needed to know for poor Milton's sake.

She immediately regained her composure. "Not in a way that makes me Chatty Kathy."

"I found a news report online. Yes, don't faint, we have running water, indoor plumbing, and Wi-Fi in most locations. We only put a log over the creek for Yankees, who want to come and visit and need to use the restroom. Keeps the Carpet Baggers away."

"He was my last partner, and had been for about six months, but I have known him since I came through the academy. Cliff's Notes version is that he was fired in the wake of a controversy involving a botched investigation. I took a buy-out the City offered to...everyone... with more than 15 years on...I needed to get away from the stress of what happened there." Kathy bit her lower lip. Not to keep herself from talking, but to keep herself from crying. She really did not want to think about Randy right now.

"I know, I asked your captain about it." He hated taking the risk to make her not like him, but Milton needed justice, not a trial that ended in a hung jury because the consulting detective was viewed as corruptible.

She was having a change of heart. Perhaps she didn't want sink her teeth into him after all, unless it was his throat. This wasn't his business to know. After all, he was the one who sought her out, not the other way around! She was getting pissed. No amount of Cajun adorableness could sweet talk her into telling that tale again! When was the Randy incident going to finally be over? Why did she feel like she had to constantly justify her actions? She wanted to cuss him out. She could show him '*hockey puck*' was beneath her vocabulary level once she was really angry.

"Look, Jason. I appreciate that you like to know who you are dealing with, but I would really like to retire from police work in peace," she asked, hoping he would drop it. There was a perfectly good homicide to talk about.

"You ratted out Randal."

"Randy...And no, what I gave was witness testimony, and only after I was asked to. But I should have reported it immediately," she said, standing. She was on the verge of asking him to leave. This conversation was over.

"Yes, you should have," he said, also standing.

"You aren't going to let me be retired in peace, are you?" She folded her arms. "You're the one who sought me out. I didn't apply for a job here. I retired! Just look around, I have a perfectly good house to concentrate on. And, as far as the City of New York goes, the Randy Bell incident is over."

"Funny, retired in peace, is RIP," he said smiling, this time with more of a cocky grin than the sweet one from earlier.

He thought she was alright. She was loyal to her friends, and it had caused a momentary delay in good judgment. Maybe, he could coax her out of retirement? He didn't have a detective right now, and none of his twelve patrol officers were even qualified. The two main issues were a lack of experience, and/or interest. Aside from the fact that four of them had accused William Caine or Ridely the Whipper of the murder tonight was

evidence that his younger officers couldn't be trusted to be objective. He smiled, she could be an asset to the town's small force.

"Hilarious, you can be quite charming given the hideous murder scene we just came from," she said, letting her arms fall to her side. The truth was, she had used much darker humor at scenes than that, and sometimes it was even her spouting off with the unnecessary comments.

He continued to smile, and lightened up. "This might sound odd, but, can we go to the third floor, and then take another look in the dining room, since that is where Jack and Ramón saw...uhh...got the message." He almost said 'ghost', but he wasn't going to allow himself to buy into the ghost theory. "Perhaps whoever left the message left some evidence?"

"Let's go," she said, leading him to the third floor. He followed along behind her. She was still feeling angry about being blindsided by the questions about Randy. Then it occurred to her, he didn't suspect her! Did he? She was on a plane, and had receipts from the store to account for the timing. "You know, I just flew back today. I wasn't even here when Milton had his encounter with the suspect."

"I know. Your captain said he drove you to the airport this morning."

She could feel his eyes on her as she led him up the little stairway to the third floor. Now, she was glad she changed out of those dirty sweats, and into clean jeans. He followed her as she walked to the other end of the attic.

They stood by the window that Mike had looked out earlier in the month. "Your brother said this is where he saw Ethan." She pointed at the window.

"Ethan?"

"Long story...It's what Mike calls him," she said. She glanced out the window. "Do you suppose it could be a runaway kid from the subdivision?"

"I don't think so. I haven't had any runaway reports, and the two usual teens who runaway, are white, not black." He looked past her, trying to avoid looking down her tee-shirt, but she also leaned over further into the window, and he couldn't help but get a full view.

Did he just look down her shirt? She squinted outside. It was hard to see anything now that it was dark. She could make out the roof of the homicide house. It was odd that it was the same house Mike had refused to buy, because it smelled like a homicide. That wasn't a coincidence, but she wasn't going to tell Jason that just yet. *Well, one thing is for sure, it smells like one now.*

He leaned in behind her to look out the window. "Hey, I just noticed that was the house Mike was looking at when he was in the market for house. That's what he meant when he said it was the house that smelled like blood, before the murder."

Kathy was exasperated. Nothing gets past him. She guessed that is why he is the Chief. Wait a minute! He just now noticed that from this angle? "Are you suggesting your brother had something to do with this?" She folded her arms.

"Jesus... no...He has a glass jaw. You could fart in his direction, and he'd squeal that you beat him up."

Kathy closed her eyes, feeling thankful that she was an only child. "I will never be able to see your brother again without thinking of that comment." She smirked, "People in the South are different than people from the North...No doubt."

He laughed, "Sorry, but it's true."

"Have you ever stayed overnight here?" She decided to go ahead and find out why he knew the house from this angle.

"Never overnight, but I have been here several times...With...aah...Well, never mind with whom. I have also been here on trespassing calls. I have never seen any ghosts while I was here though."

"You used my house as a flop house for holster huggers?" She folded her arms tighter. Oh, she minded who! Police weren't known for being faithful in the area of relationships. She caught herself, was she jealous? She then scolded herself. *For crying out loud, you just freaking met him. You don't know anything about him, except that he's good at instant background checks.* He also had a kind smile, and dreamy dark brown eyes, with soft, handsome, well groomed dark hair.

He blushed, "It was a really, super, long time ago. Well, I don't think we'll learn anything else up here."

"Sounds like you learned plenty already," she teased, as she turned to leave.

He shrugged.

They left the attic without seeing ghosts. She paused in the foyer with him. They both looked into the dining room where Ramón said he saw the ghost. Neither of them saw anything in there, or the adjoining ballroom.

"Are you sure you are doing alright?" he asked, reaching for the door.

"I am not afraid of ghosts. As I already said, I have never seen one. With as many places I have been I would..."

He picked up her hand, and kissed the back of it, "Not what I meant. I will see you later, Kathy." He turned and walked out to the patrol car. "Don't worry, I'll click the gate-lock for you."

Kathy wandered back upstairs, and got ready for bed. She tried to read the first chapter of the new novel she downloaded at the airport, but her thoughts kept drifting. Not back to the horrendous homicide scene, but instead to Jason Rose. She kissed her own hand good night where he had.

"I'll get over it eventually," she said. She put her tablet down and turned out the light.

THE BYGONE SECRETS OF THE CAINE PLANTATION

In the morning Kathy sat on the balcony outside her master bedroom. She had moved her little plastic lawn chair out there. It was the perfect place to eat her breakfast, which consisted of a coffee and a protein bar. She couldn't wait for the stove to get here.

She settled more comfortably into her chair, since the appliances and cable were coming today that meant the only thing on her list was *hurry up and wait*. Meanwhile, she had the local history guide that she had picked up at the bookstore to keep her entertained.

According to the guide, Marissa Henning-Caine was the first Mistress of the plantation. She married William Alistair Caine in 1809 when she was sixteen. They built the plantation and moved into it in 1810. Their only child, Percy was born the following year. The next page featured a photograph of her hand painted portrait. It portrayed a thin pretty woman, with light ginger hair. Mrs. Caine was credited for helping to pave the way for slaves to escape to the North on what would eventually become known as the Underground Railroad. She also ran several political groups for the humane treatment of freed slaves who remained in the South, before the Civil War.

William had known she was in the advocacy group, but had no idea she was trafficking slaves to the North. He found out when she impulsively negotiated the purchase of a slave at the Blanc plantation right off the whipping post. Apparently, Blanc had intended to beat the field slave for

having an affair with a house slave. The two were expecting a baby Blanc had not requested. Marissa could not stand to watch anyone in such pain. She had paid twice what Blanc had paid for the field hand. The incident had been the tip-off to William that she was in much deeper than just a few activist groups.

The Blanc plantation was to this day, notorious for the poor treatment of slaves, or anyone else for that matter. In fact, their reputation was so bad that no one would have the land. Twice, the state had tried to gift the property to anyone who had the ability to restore it, and twice the deal fell through. There had been two later attempts to auction it off, but locally it was viewed as cursed, so no one bought the property. Finally, in June of 1957 the state finally bulldozed the house after Hurricane Audrey ripped the roof off, cracking the house's main support joist. The next year a prison was built.

"Too bad EBay wasn't around. It might have made it, if restored properly." Kathy smiled, and sipped her coffee, unaware of the black fog gathering behind her in the bedroom. It was slowly spinning in the middle of the room, like a little hurricane.

William had been furious with Marissa. He had threatened to divorce her for humiliating him in public like that. Ultimately they stayed together, but only briefly. She died about two months later. The new field hand hadn't lasted long in the sugar cane fields. One day he became stuck in the muck at the edge of the bayou where they planted a small patch of rice for plantation use. Percy was angry, and left the field hand in the muck. He had meant to come back in the morning, but the field hand had been eaten by a stray alligator, and only a few were bits left.

Kathy stiffened. "Stray alligator? How can wild animals be strays, only domestic animals can? Who wrote this?" Then thought of an alligator stuck her, wasn't it the state reptile? She peeked over the edge of book, and looked out at the leading edge of the bayou. "Are there any alligators here now!" She squinted to see further. There almost certainly had to be alligators over there. She glared over at the area, like that would keep them away. She refocused on the book, forgetting to check whether or not it was peer reviewed by qualified history professionals for accuracy.

Marissa had planned a break from her cause of freeing the slaves in order to make others believe that she was no longer helping the slaves. Again, Kathy paused at the idea the paragraph was presenting. This was supposed to be a history guide, but it read like someone just threw it together.

"If she is *taking a break*, then she isn't helping them, not just giving the appearance of it."

Unbeknownst to her, the black fog was swirling larger in the room behind her.

According to the next paragraph, Marissa needed time to formulate a plan to drive the idea...*underground*. Otherwise she was risking too much, and then she would lose the chance to help anyone at all.

Kathy smiled. *Underground* was an interesting choice of words for a book about a period just prior to what would become the network known as The Underground Railroad. The railroad itself was a new concept in the US about ten years after the Caine's built the house. This article was painting a very pretty picture of the frail looking young woman in the portrait. However, if Marissa was the equivalent of the 'CIA Chief' in her operation of running slaves north then she would have to have been ruthless to be even remotely successful. Additionally, she had been older when she bought the slave off the whipping post. She would not need time to formulate anything. Her operation would have already been in place; it would have been a matter of protecting it. One didn't simply wake up one morning and decide to become a successful smuggler overnight. Secured routes would have been needed. *Agents* would be needed, and time to develop the contacts necessary to rule out the possibility of accidentally recruiting a law enforcement agent. {Author note: This 'research' about the Underground is fabricated from local word of mouth legends, and parts are made up to support the story. Please see the link at the beginning for 'the Underground Railroad myths that have been busted.'}

Kathy had keen profiling skills, and she figured that Marissa's so-called *break* had more to do with being unable to deal with it anymore. Marissa had been able to hide her involvement when she was younger, but too much had been going on, for far too long. She figured, Marissa needed to

step back and refocus before she could decide whether or not to continue to move the operation forward. It seemed more logical to assume that it was a mental rest bit to avoid a continued psychological break, than to assume the theory presented in the book. It just didn't match up with the way a long term successful smuggling operation would have to operate. It seemed, nonsensical. It also only highlighted the Caine's involvement, but what about the African Americans? The operation would not have worked, at all, without African American operatives.

Kathy knew the feeling well, the thought of being faced with a task that cannot be left undone, but not having the heart to do it. The thought that she didn't want to be a homicide detective anymore had crossed her mind more than once during the last handful of cases she had handled. The frightening part was that it had been the constant political battles that had taken her drive, not the cases and stories of the victims. It had taken a great deal of effort to move the last few cases forward. The buyout had been perfectly timed. The only thing that worried her was that the further back in the time line of her life her former career traveled, the less tolerance she had for the victims' stories. Like last evening, she had blocked out the gore by concentrating on being jealous of whomever Jason had brought to the house to shag instead of focusing on the help he asked for in getting justice for poor Milton Lawrence.

She sighed, and leaned her head back on her chair. She wished she could leave poor Milton to Jason and his officers. But, a newly found low tolerance for gore or not, she already knew, she would help both of them. She was not yet as weary as Marissa Caine had been with helping people who were trapped in extreme situations, but she was getting close.

She straightened up, and took a bite of her protein bar before turning back to the book.

It was believed that Marissa was killed by means of food poisoning, by the cook, a house slave known as Dark Lady. She was believed to have been Marissa's co-conspirator for trafficking slaves to freedom. There was no photograph of a beautiful hand painted portrait of her in this Caine puff-piece. In fact, other than her name 'Dark Lady', there was no description of her at all. Kathy wished there was one. She was curious if it matched Jack and Ramón's description.

The only useful tidbit of information was that Dark Lady's sister and brother-in-law had survived. They still had living relatives in the area, at least forty-five of them.

Kathy smiled, she would have to track them down and see if there were any family stories passed down over the generations. She knew she couldn't find first hand witnesses, so second hand, or most likely third hand, would have to do.

She read on, Marissa Caine had died almost instantly. She had been found in her bed. Dark Lady had been whipped to death by William Caine. Mr. Caine's journal described Marissa's fingernails as having a blue tinge to them. It was believed that Dark Lady had cooked a bad meal and killed Marissa. And while some believed she murdered Marissa, William refused. His diary indicated that he believed the two to be too good of friends for Dark Lady to murder her. He wrote that if she killed Marissa, it was almost certain to be an accident.

"That sounds like Cyanide, not bad food," Cyanide killed fast. It starved oxygen from blood cells. Victims basically suffocated. She couldn't think of anything else at the moment that was available in the mid 1800's. She would have to do some research on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention website to see if there was anything else out there that would do that. She made a note in her tablet's calendar. "If it was Cyanide, then whoever gave it to Marissa meant to kill her. And I would be willing to bet it wasn't Dark Lady. Knowing victims and suspects, I would venture to guess that she would have too much to lose by killing Marissa Caine. We need to find out who would benefit the most by her death."

Kathy frowned. There were holes in this so-called guide that didn't make sense. The main question was, is it bad research, or just a media puff-piece about how mysteriously great things used to be? Given the amount of videos on YouTube, she would venture to guess that the so-called haunting of the Caine Plantation was a decent tourist draw; so why was the town wanting to bulldoze it? Why didn't they restore and put it on a tour with the museum?

She thought for a moment before pulling out her tablet and jotting down some questions she had, that she knew wouldn't be answered by this

book. "Why did Marissa only take slaves from surrounding plantations? What about her own slaves? Weren't they worthy of being free to?" She sipped her coffee, and then finished her protein bar.

She gazed out over the balcony railing. The trees bridged the driveway so beautifully that she could stare at the *covered bridge* the branches formed over the driveway all day. Perhaps she would call her mother later this afternoon and see if she wanted to visit. Right now, she enjoyed the coolness of the morning, and the fact that it was not twenty-eight degrees.

She flipped a page and found a photograph of Dark Lady's bill of sale. It read female, eleven years old. She had been purchased for \$200. The only thing that tied the bill to Dark Lady was the caption under the photo that identified it as being found in William Caine's papers with 'Dark Lady' and a question mark after it.

Kathy briefly thought of the movie *Schindler's List*. Oscar Schindler had saved many Jews from the concentration camps during the Nazi's reign of power. He had to force them into slavery to keep them alive. However, Schindler could only save a few at a time. He knew full well that anyone he left on the trains was going to their death. It had driven him mad with grief at one point. He had a Jewish clerk who helped him make the choices. The level of trust that must have existed between the two had to have been extraordinary. The initial plan must have been terrifying, for both of them, not knowing whether or not they could trust each other; having to wait for the level of loyalty to prove itself true. Not knowing whether or not a raid team was coming for them, because they had trusted the wrong person. Fear, terror, uncertainty, keeping righteous lies,...forcing yourself to somehow become manageably insane to get a job done, that couldn't be left undone.

What would Kathy do in that situation? Would she let a hundred die to save twenty? Would she be too scared, and not act at all, leaving all hundred and twenty to die to avoid making the choice? Perhaps she would do like Marissa, and try to save one too many, blowing her cover? Would it drive her mad? There seemed to be evidence to suggest that Marissa was no longer thinking with a clear head, such as intervening with the public whipping. She may as well taken an ad in the paper that she was engaging in human trafficking to the North. How could one be sane after making

decisions like that, over and over again? She would feel like a murderer, or at the very least a party to murder.

The people who started and ran the Underground Railroad didn't get enough credit, both African American and White. They would have had to have worked together. The slave would have somehow bridge the gap from kidnapped and sold into slavery to trust the very same group of people to help them escape.

Then Kathy remembered something. "Jason said, Milton's little girl calls about the closet ghost to say she is crying about leading many to death."

She covered her mouth, as if what she just realized shouldn't be spoken out loud. "Poor Dark Lady. That was the position you were in, after was Marissa was forced to back out. Anyone already in the 'pipeline' to freedom through the Caine plantation was now cut-off; basically left to the mercy of the runaway hunters." Dark Lady had led them from their homes, under the hope of freedom, and now had to send them back, or at least send them on with no further provisions or instructions on how to make the next connection.

"Holy hand baskets to Hell, Batman! The sidekick can't be the hero. They simply aren't in the position of power to do it, despite having the heart to carry it out. A network is needed. There has to be a Commissioner Gordon to overlook it, an Alfred to take care of things for the heroes, and a sympathetic media contact to keep the good press coming so suspicion never looks toward them," Kathy said. "So...Who was this Dynamic Duo's Gordon and Alfred? Someone had to look the other way, and someone had to do Dark Lady's job while she assisted Marissa."

Kathy felt a lump in her throat. She quickly sipped at her coffee. It was just too tragic to think about. How did people survive? They didn't. Dark Lady certainly didn't. She was whipped to death. The field hand Marissa had blown her cover for was left to the alligators. Many survived, but many more died. Just like the people on Schindler's List. "May Jesus have mercy on you, Dark Lady."

She read on. The Caine son, Percy, had three sons and a daughter. The daughter married and moved to Vermont. She was never seen in town

again. The youngest son eventually took over the plantation after the elder two sons were killed in the Civil War.

She looked at the photo of the painted portrait of Percy Caine's little daughter. She looked very much like Marissa, with the ginger hair of her grandmother. "Did you runaway too? Or, did they just marry you off to get rid of you?" Kathy asked the painted portrait of the Caine granddaughter.

The guide went on to speculate that Percy took up the network after his mother's death, but there is little or no record of him succeeding at anything, especially after his arrest for trafficking.

"Too bad there wasn't an arrest report to review. Maybe there is a log in the police archives?" It would be a good opportunity to spend time with Jason.

A smack on the floor caused her to jump. She turned around to find the box with her books in it had fallen on the floor. There was no sign of the black fog. "How did that happen?" She walked over to the box. "Oh, the box under it collapsed on the back."

She set her book down, and then stacked the fallen books back into the box. She picked up one, and smiled. It was a copy of her cold case training manual. It had been this particular training session that had put her ahead of the pack during the interview process when she was promoted to detective.

She set the book on top of the box, picked up the local history guide, and returned to her coffee on the porch. She paused and thought of Jack and Ramón, and their claim that the house was haunted. Her cold case text just fell on the floor, of all her books that was the one? Was someone trying to get her attention regarding the original murder on the property? She shook her head. It was stupid. Ghosts didn't exist.

She turned her attention back to the historical guide pushing supernatural ideas out of her mind. The last chapter was about Dark Lady's death. There was a photo of the whip. It was identical to the one found at the homicide last night. The caption identified it as a replica to the one the Dark Lady was whipped to death with. It was period, but not the same whip. No one had seen the real whip since Dark Lady's death. There were

rumors William Caine had buried her with it somewhere on the Caine Plantation.

Kathy wondered where she was buried. Could it be on Milton's property, since here had been reports of Dark Lady crying in the closet? She had to get that whip out of her grave. Who would want to be buried with their own murder weapon? Something about it seemed unholy.

She turned the page.

Dark Lady's little grandson was Stable Boy. Kathy wondered if that was 'Ethan.' He was six when he died. Beyond those two sentences, there was nothing regarding his death, or how it happened.

Kathy frowned again, she had easily found the newspaper article that indicated he had died on the same day as his grandmother. Seems like the author could have found that tidbit of information?

Her thoughts drifted back to the Lawrence murder. It was more than an interesting coincidence that this whip would be in this photo. The photo credits showed it as being part of a display in the local museum, along with the whipping post that Dark Lady was chained to, and one of her famed hand sewn quilts that fueled the railroad quilt rumor in town.

She picked up another article. Apparently, much later in his life, it was rumored that Percy Caine began trafficking slaves to the North, deliberately, to cause financial hardship to the surrounding plantations. Percy's idea was to run up their costs, and buy up their land when money became tight. Replacing slaves was expensive. This no doubt caused a tremendous financial burden on their competition. Each missing slave was like missing six to ten thousand dollars, or more, in modern dollars depending on the slave's training.

Kathy glanced at the reporter's name, Robert Lacompte. He was the same reporter from the article about the dressmaker, later. Was he looking for some of the missing African-Americans that Percy and Blanc kidnapped? Kathy wondered if he had been able to find them. Whatever the circumstance, Robert knew more than he was reporting.

"Were you Commissioner Gordon?" she asked. "Where you the one

allowing Marissa to get away with taking the slaves to the North? The puff-pieces prior to her death, the call for help by interviewing the dressmaker, so why allow the trafficking headline?" She Googled the name and was immediately overwhelmed with thousands of results. The search for Robert Lacompé would have to wait.

She picked up the book again, reading the last line in the chapter about Percy. *'However, none of the Caine slaves had wanted to escape.'*

"Or more to the point, if they did, it wasn't reported." Kathy seriously doubted life was ponies and pink glitter on the Caine Plantation for the slaves. "I can think of at least two who would have been very happy to escape the Caine Plantation without doing any research at all. In fact, it seems life here wasn't ideal for anyone, white or black. Who wrote this?"

She turned the book over to see if there was a photo of the author. Lauren Grayson was the main contributor! She sighed, loudly, that's why it seemed fake! It was just more of Lauren's lies of omission.

Kathy sighed, feeling a bit deflated. She had felt good about the history Lauren had told her about the plantations' Underground Railroad involvement. Now she just felt duped. She was a veteran police officer and an experienced homicide detective. She was embarrassed that she had bought Lauren's malarkey hook line and sinker, even though she had been suspicious that Lauren was leaving things out. She had sensed it was something else, something personal not something related to the history. So, why did she contradict her own book?

She glared at Lauren's photo, "Or maybe you're just a pathological liar. Why was it that no one could just do something because it was the right thing to do? They were moving slaves out to screw their neighbors, not because they were freedom fighters. Well at least some people were finding freedom, regardless of the motives."

She thought about Lauren and the possibility of her being mentally ill. She was by no means a psychiatrist, but she had talked to enough mentally ill people to know one when she saw one. She suspected that Lauren's lies were to build and maintain her fantasy. She thought the official term for it was *pseudo logia fantastica*. It was usually part of another larger mental

illness, but Kathy wasn't sure. She would have to pull some research on it. Then she smiled. "Maybe I should visit Lauren...return her gesture of friendship." She knew a few interrogation techniques that would ferret out whether or not Lauren lived in a fantasy world.

Her phone rang with the new ghostly tone she had downloaded, "Hello."

"Good morning, Kathy, It's Jason. Want some coffee? I have some Starbucks getting cold here. Plus Ramón and Jack emailed me their statements. I thought you might like to see them, even if there isn't anything new in them."

"I would love to." She glanced toward the gate, and dumped the little bit of her home brew that was left in an empty box full of packing tissue. She smiled, nothing like the equivalent of flowers delivered in the morning by a hot Cajun man in uniform. "Do you know anyone who can install a remote for the gate?"

"Yes. The gate isn't near the house, so we should be able to get someone to do it without them carrying on about ghosts."

Ten minutes later she was sitting on the back porch with Jason while she looked over the statements. It was basically just a replay of what they had said before, over and over again. She wasn't surprised, they had both sounded traumatized. She wondered what the story would sound like in two months, after their fear/terror manifested itself into their memories. The stories would effectively become lies, but not like Lauren's lies. They would be lies created to protect their sanity after being terrorized, not to feed a fantasy. The movers would be able to read their statements and ground themselves back into the truth. There was also the concern of what the movers must have really seen.

Lauren was moving up on her priority list of people to interview. If Lauren was suffering from pseudo logia fantastica, she wouldn't be able to ground herself in the truth because she really believed the lie. However, that was a big 'if'. Did the movers see Lauren? Lauren wasn't African American, and although skinny, she was at least 5'8", tall for a woman. What about the little boy?

"Do you think they were doing drugs?" Jason didn't look like he thought so, but it was an obvious question that an attorney would ask, and so, it was an obvious question to address during the investigation.

Kathy shook her head, "I very seriously doubt it. They were the top requested guys. If they were doing drugs there would be signs, such as going from top requested to second...and so on down the line, or shall I say, rapidly down to rock-bottom. Loads would be showing up late, or partial. The moving company wouldn't risk the bonus with sketchy drivers. If nothing else, they wouldn't have the same hallucination. They saw something, the question is who?"

He nodded in agreement.

One thing stuck out about the statements, '*Tell Mistress*'. Kathy didn't look like Marissa, but they both had red hair, even if they were different shades. Was she being referred to as Mistress? Was that video talking to her, as the homicide detective? She scolded herself for such a foolish notion, No, of course they weren't addressing her. The video had been made just prior to her becoming a cadet. Ghosts don't exist. They needed to concentrate on finding the woman who scared the movers, because she obviously saw something and was trying to get help.

"Ghosts let you sleep?" he asked, with a cocky grin, laying a folder down on the little bistro table. "Mike said you had asked about real incidents on the property, ones that did not involve ghosts. I made copies from our archive library."

"Oh thank you!" *OK, he is back on the menu.* She had *flowers* in the form of her favorite coffee and the equivalent of a box of fine chocolates with the folder.

"My pleasure, Ma'am," he said smiling. He sipped at his coffee.

"Kathy, please. I feel old enough being retired without being called Ma'am. Anything new on the Lawrence case?" She smiled, but he averted his eyes.

He smiled, refocusing on her, and shook his head, "The evidence hasn't even arrived at the lab yet. We don't have our own crime lab, everything is

shipped out."

"Oh yes. I suppose that was one of the benefits of working for such a large department, but of course we had a much higher case volume too. I am sure that helped justify having our own lab." Her former department had normal case volume delays, but sometimes stuff came back right away, especially if it was a case that caught the interest of the lab tech. This case certainly would have.

"Have you ever seen anything like this," Jason asked, making a face at the photo of Lawrence's body.

"Not quite, certainly not with a whip. A couple of times we had some really bad bludgeoning's, but the weapon of choice was a bat. I personally worked two. It was a lover in one case, and a jilted lover in the other case. I have never seen a stranger do this to someone. Strangers just bonk them on the head hard enough to get away. Poor Milton probably had better odds of winning the lotto, twice, in a row, than he did of this happening to him at the hands of a stranger." She handed him the local history book, "Take a look at this story."

He took it, and immediately stared at it. "How does she do it?"

"Who?"

"It is just amazing how some succeed, and others fail." He pointed to the file folder he just laid down. "Check out the one with the pink Postie. It's a homicide report."

Kathy opened the file and pulled out the copy.

"November 15th, 1858. William Alistair Caine, murder victim. Found by a field hand in the stable. He had been chained to the whipping post, but was whipped in the stable hands' quarters. V-Shaped blood stains indicated a repeated whipping pattern. The stains adorned the ceiling and wall. His body had been chained to the whipping post after he died. There were drag marks from the stable hands' quarters to the post. Deputy Peiet, seems to believe that Mr. Caine wasn't dead yet, since there was so much blood surrounding the post, but not on the post. Mr. Caine's injuries were consistent with being whipped to death by meanings of an arrowhead cat-

O-nine tails whip, otherwise known as a razor whip..."

"Jason! There are some remarkable similarities to the Lawrence murder here!"

"I know. We have a homicidal history buff on the loose. The problem is that everyone locally knows, or has access to the plantation's history. It isn't like we can pick out one paranormal ghost hunter as the suspect for the Lawrence murder. You're the only person out of the loop on the plantation's history. You know, that is how you were able to buy this house for twenty five dollars. Everyone who lives around here is afraid of it. Did you know you were the third bid person from EBay? The others barely set foot in the foyer before leaving town, and never coming back. They just signed the house back over to the bank from afar. Locally, children scare each other with dares to walk across the property, let alone go inside the house."

"Or dare their brothers to stay overnight in the attic?"

He smiled, and sipped his coffee, before offering a shrug.

Kathy frowned as she read William's report, "There is no suspect listed."

"Nope, it's one of the oldest cold cases in state history. Most people think Dark Lady did it. He had whipped her to death in the same manner. People around here are very superstitious. Don't worry, I don't think that, she had been dead eleven years. This was a personal matter, and whoever did it staged it to play to the old Voodoo superstitions. Although, I have not seen anything in Voodoo that mirror that. Most of the Voodoo people I know are afraid to use curses. They believe the price for such magic is that it comes back on you three fold."

"Meaning, the same thing as a non-Voodoo-thingy...Whoever committed this murder, and the Lawrence murder, was highly pissed off, and willing to pay any price to watch the victim suffer." Voodoo! Now there was Voodoo to go with so-call *stray* Alligators! This place definitely had its charm.

"Non-Voodoo-thingy?" He smiled. "You mean, the same as a standard homicide?"

She nodded, "Do you know many people who practice Voodoo?"

"There are only a few in town, but they are quiet folks. We rarely, if at all have trouble with them."

"Should we talk to them?"

"No! You own and live on a piece of property that they firmly believe is cursed. There isn't enough sage for them to cleanse even a vicarious Caine presence from their homes. Aside from that, the majority of them are Caine or Blanc slave descendants."

"Okay, no Voodoo"

He shook his head, no. "I would be absolutely stunned if any of them turned out to be Milton's killer. They just wouldn't risk it. The thing I'll say, is that if something happened to them that was bad enough to risk that kind of black magic, I would probably already know about it and wouldn't be surprised at their use of it to get revenge."

She nodded and set William's report aside. "Talk about poetic justice for William! Well, that is a comforting thought, but I still don't believe in ghosts, or Voodoo." She wondered if the killer thought to have the whip buried with him, just like he did for Dark Lady.

"Yes. And, unfortunately, even though we know William killed Dark Lady, there were no laws for or against it at the time. The Dark Lady's '*damage to property report*' is also in there. By the time William was whipped to death he was an old man. It was a decade after Dark Lady's death. Still I think whoever did this," he pointed at William's report, "meant for it to look like Dark Lady came back and took ghostly revenge. I also think that whoever wanted Milton Lawrence dead used this case, and Dark Lady's as inspiration. But the fact that William's case is buried in police archives and Dark Lady's is literally showcased is probably cosmic karma. I would guess, whoever did this would have to be a maniacal history buff, because they would have to dig for this. Mike and I knew Milton and his family. They aren't history buffs. They're accountants. Period. Milton's Uncle is the president of the local bank. He and his two sisters ran a tax return business, and dabbled in investing. They also run a program for single parents to help them take control of their financial futures. They are all busy folks, and I

just don't see where they would have time to plan and carry this out. Or even have the mentality to do this to a loved one. At minimum, one of them would have to go missing during the final planning of it. It just doesn't add up. It is mid-tax season, after all. If the town's tax return people stop showing up for work, trust me, someone would have complained and tried to report them missing."

Kathy nodded, and then read the report. It finally sunk in what Dark Lady's report was. "Damage to property? Her death was ruled as damage to property? Are you kidding me? Talk about insult to injury!"

"We are actually really lucky to have a report at all, and ultimately the report would have been taken as reported, and I am sure that is the way William reported it. As to any argument law enforcement had at the time," he shrugged, "I am not sure it would have been taken into consideration. All I can tell you is that, in modern times, I decide how it is written, which is in line with what state laws say. Back in the day, the plantation owners kept the records. And, each was to his own. Which brings us to the real question; why did he make a report at all?"

"Well, you are the Chief now. You can make an entry for her, and update the file. It was a homicide. At least list her as an unnatural death. Damage to property, indeed."

He nodded. "I can do that, it seems the least I can do with it. However, the original mystery that kicked this whole thing off is *who killed Marissa Caine*. It could be that Dark Lady was innocent? If that is the case, I can make a correction on that record too, because despite William's belief, she is listed on the report as a suspect."

Then something he had said struck her, "What do you mean by 'lucky', didn't they record deaths back then?"

"They did. In fact they kept very meticulous records. They just didn't report murdered slaves to law enforcement unless they didn't have a clue who did it. If a slave was murdered, the plantation owners usually took care of the suspect by making him...or her.....wish they were dead, or writing it off as a loss, as opposed to having an investigation. It also depended on who committed the murder, whether or not the suspect was white or black,

a stranger or the owner, a host of convoluted things. Runaways were a whole different matter. I have a ton of those reports. The Caine family has some of those too."

"I thought I read somewhere they didn't have any runaways." She pointed at the book in Jason's hands.

He laughed, "You have the sanitized version from Lauren." He held up the back of the book, with Lauren Grayson's photo on it, and flicked it with his fingers. "I have actual witness reports that He trafficked, or more appropriately kidnapped and transported the slaves across sovereign borders under the premise of traveling north. However, it is strongly suspected that he shipped them to the sugar cane, tobacco and cotton plantations in Haiti, Cuba, and Jamaica. Not to the North. He was arrested, but somehow the evidence wasn't strong enough to prosecute him, or more to the point, he was too politically strong to investigate. I can't imagine being the Parish Sheriff and trying to find a judge willing to sign a search warrant on anyone in the Caine family. Those are both elected positions, as you know. I would lay a year's pay that Percy probably '*donated*' a great deal of money to the right person's coffers. Check out the blue Postie. You'll see it just sits there in the file, with no follow-up investigation...unofficially forgotten." He pointed to the folder.

She pulled out Percy's arrest report, and accompanying witness reports. The evidence here was more than enough to get a search warrant for the rest of the evidence. There was no follow up interviews, reasons for a search warrant, or any other warrant being denied were recorded. Not even a trial date set after Percy's arrest. It was simply placed in a drawer, and forgotten. "Why wouldn't Lauren include this in her book?" She also wondered if Robert Lacompte knew of this report. Probably not, she was sure he would have reported it.

He shrugged. "She has this unicorn and pony view of the Old South's heyday, with no consideration as to who really facilitated that heyday."

"He was fencing slaves under the false hope of freedom. Wow, instilling false hope has got to be a damnable sin. No wonder the house is haunted, I would beat the doors and rafters until I got justice too." She was retired; that meant she could dig and find out what happened to Marissa Caine. "Is

it possible that Marissa tried to stop Percy, and he murdered her, framing Dark Lady?" She had worked and solved cold cases before. They were difficult, but not impossible. But she also had all this work to do to the house. It felt good to finally have more than one purpose. She had felt so useless since retiring.

"Who knows what Marissa knew? As you said, this place has been stripped bare, so I doubt we will find anything here." He shrugged.

"Least of all rats."

He grinned and blushed, offering a playful shrug.

She flipped through a few pages and found Marissa's certificate of death. It read; *poisoned, found dead in bed*. "Gee! Wasn't anyone taught how to make a proper autopsy report! What sort of poison? What did the fingernails look like? Was there an odor? How did, not only her hair look, but the roots look? Dull, or shiny? What color were her lips? Was there anything under her fingernails, or bruises on her forearms that would suggest a struggle? All of these essential questions are not be answered by this report, but should have been. It reeks of a cover up. Not that I am trying to sound racist, but Marissa Caine was a very influential white woman, in a time when that meant everything, and her death-murder was an incomplete foot note? Not only that, but William Caine was all, but forgotten."

He gave a blank, *I-am-not-sure-what-to-say-look*, and said, "All I can say is that I wasn't in charge then. Maybe if Percy killed her, he paid someone off to be vague, because I have some old reports, and they are very detailed."

Jason was right, only Dark Lady's death was showcased, so the fact that Milton's murder matched, not Dark Lady's, but William's would help narrow things down.

"We might be able to help Dark Lady, but we need to help Mr. Lawrence first, after all his unsolved case involves a live murderer running around."

"Yes, we need to see if there is a way to sort out the people who left comments on his YouTube video. Perhaps one of them is the killer?" She nodded, and sipped the last of her Starbucks, "Can you show me the caves.

If the killer is a crazed history buff, he may have hid there as a matter of principle. We might be able to compare the users, if we can trace them, to people who might have access to William's file."

"Everyone has access; it's still a public record. But, no one has requested them." He nodded, and led her toward the caves.

She couldn't help but notice him watching her walk along, glancing often at her out the corner of his eye. Twice he seemed to reach for her, but seemed to catch himself to keep from reaching for her hand.

He wasn't as easy to be around as Mike, but she could sit and talk to him all day. Although, he seemed painfully shy.

He pointed to a wooded patch. "The so-called caves are just on the other side of that really small hill. They have been eroded over time by hurricanes. It is just a big sink hole. Hurricane Katrina really did a number on it."

"I was surprised to hear there were caves here. I don't know about caves, but this just seemed like an 'uncavey' kind of place, so a sinkhole makes more sense."

"Uncavey?" He smiled, pulling out his best southern drawl, "Is that one of them there fancy geo-logical terms used up north of the Mason Dixon where the educated folk live?" he laughed at her, and then smiled with eyes shining at her. "You say the strangest things."

"Too funny," she said, laughing at herself. "It is a very technical term used only in Union States for the express purpose of confusing the Rebels."

"Thought so," he said, still laughing. "Seriously though, I have no idea why everyone here calls them caves? I guess because they have never seen a 'real' cave?"

After a couple of minutes of walking she stopped, "You know, ten acres is a lot! Do I have to mow all this?" No wonder everything grew wild here! No one wanted to mow! But, the trees are so big and beautiful, and mowing would showcase them. She needed a good landscaper, and not just an initial one.

To the south was the subdivision, built sometime in the 1980's from the land the lawyer's wife sold. To the southwest was the beginning of a thick wooded area, but not swampy like across the street. She wondered if there were any alligators in there. Between them was the remaining land of the plantation. Milton's house was toward the far southeast end of the property, by the older subdivision.

Perhaps she could lease some of the land to a local farmer? 8 acres would make a nice field of sugar cane or cotton, couldn't it, and bring in some income. She had no idea how big a field had to be! She would have to research it. She didn't even own house plants, let alone have grown anything on her three by six balcony.

"Come on City Dweller. The so-called cavey area is just over this little hill."

A couple of minutes later they rounded the little hill and found a small partially collapsed cave/sinkhole. It resembled no cave Kathy had ever seen. He was right, it was just a water eroded sinkhole.

Kathy looked around and put her hands on her hips. "So this is where the slaves hid waiting for Percy to screw them as only a screwdriver of those who know how to screw hard can screw people. There is barely cover to hide here."

He laughed again, "Something tells me that isn't exactly how that phrase goes, but yes, they waited here. And, it must have been a bit bigger back then. When I was a little boy it was bigger. Each hurricane has 'smoothed' it over, so to speak. There can't be any evidence of the slaves having had been here with all the weather erosion to the '*cavey*-area'."

She smiled and shrugged. "You were careful with your language in front of me, so I assumed you were a gentleman."

He was about to come up with a pithy response when something caught his eye. "Hey! Look here!" he said, bending down to look at three little stone arrowheads. They looked like the ones attached to the whip that was used to kill Milton Lawrence."

"They looked like they have been formed to a sharp point. Since it

appears like the killer waited here, we should collect these. The lab could tell us if they were made recently, or are of the period." She looked around again, and saw something about twenty feet away. "Look, footprints and a drag mark, headed toward the Lawrence home. Looks like someone wearing work boots dragged the whipping post from here. Lord Almighty! The killer was on my property! I wonder if that was who Jack and Ramón saw. It was the killer escaping through what she thought was abandoned property." Kathy took out her phone and started snapping photographs. "Do you have any casting material?" she asked, referring to the fact that they needed to make a plaster cast of the footprints and drag mark to preserve them for later.

"I have an evidence processing kit in the trunk of the patrol car," he said, pointing back toward the house. "I'll be right back." He offered an 'it-figures' look as he jogged back toward the house.

Kathy nodded, as she started making a video of the scene. These weren't just any boots, only one set of boots had that tread and logo mark in the center, and it was Rocky Police boots! Other people bought them too, but because of their distinctive look and light weight they were particularly fashionable amongst police, fire, and paramedics. Basically, with anyone who would show up at your door if you called 911. They were very expensive, but well worth the price. She had seen this very style print a hundred times at crime scenes, but usually it was after the fact, and not as a matter of serious evidence.

She took a close up photo of the prints and drag mark. It looked too small to be Jason's, and she didn't notice if he walked in this area or not. She couldn't remember if Mike's foot was the same size as Jason's. They seemed to be about the same size physically.

Then she remembered, Jason said he had twelve officers, and two of them were part timers to cover the shift gaps. What about fire fighters and paramedics? In a small town like this, fire and medics were probably cross-trained to save money. There couldn't be an abundance of these boots in a men's size six running around. What about the Blanc plantation? Wasn't it a prison? She wondered if the prison guards wore them, or if they wore the dress shoe version. The dress shoe version did not have the same tread.

She put her foot next to it to confirm her belief it was a men's size six. The print was a hair bigger than her foot, meaning the foot inside would be about the same size as hers. It also had wear patterns similar to hers, except whoever wore this boot dragged the balls of his feet more so than the heel. People walked differently, making the wear patterns on the soles of their shoes unique to the way they place their feet when they walk, or more to the point, drag their feet.

"What's that?" Jason said, huffing as he returned a few minutes later.

"What?"

He pointed behind her, toward the trees. "You know, maybe ten acres is a long walk."

Kathy smiled, as she turned to look at what he was pointing at. A purple patchwork quilt was hanging on a tree branch. Her smile dipped immediately. It was a beautiful hodgepodge of fabric types, mostly of varying shades of purple, with smatterings of other colors.

"Was that there before?" Jason asked, setting the evidence kit down.

Kathy shrugged, "We must have missed it." She doubted the words, even as she spoke them. The quilt was back into the woods only a few feet. It was fully visible to anyone approaching from the plantation. Her stomach tightened, had someone snuck up behind her while she was examining the footprint? She hadn't heard anything. She could have just been killed, right now.

She walked over to it looking for footprints. "I don't see any footprints, and no branches were disturbed, nothing is out of place. How did this get here?"

Jason shrugged. "It's your property."

The quilt was meticulously hand cut, and stitched. It looked like it was made yesterday, but the style was period for the Caine murder, and their murdered slave, Dark Lady. She had seen a photo of the display in Lauren's book. The original quilt was at the museum, but it couldn't be the same quilt. This looked new.

"Hey look, this white rose bud patch is the same as the red quilt from the museum. It also has the same description the movers gave of the woman's dress." She pointed at the quilt, looking at Jason, "Do you have an evidence bag big enough for it? I could go get something from the house. I bought some trash bags. We could tape one up."

"Let me see." The kit only had one large bag. *Stupid!* He and Mike had used it at the museum, and not replaced it. He looked up, preparing to be embarrassed, and look like a hick cop, when he noticed the quilt was gone. "Hey?" he said pointing.

Kathy look over at the quilt, "It's gone! There was a quilt there, wasn't there!" she said, feeling odd asking the question. Of course it was. Why hadn't she snapped a photo! Probably because evidence didn't normally go missing like that!

Jason nodded. "Let's just process this scene, and then get out of here."

She nodded, regretting not snapping a photo of the quilt. They collected the evidence. Kathy also found a sharpening stone in some weeds. The killer had taken the time to sharpen the arrowheads, and even replaced some of them. "What did poor Milton do to warrant this level of planning to torture him to death? Do you think he forgot a deduction? An important one?"

He shrugged and made a face. "God, what could anyone do to warrant such planning? This is like a story from Hell, and what torture they might use there."

Kathy's thoughts drifted back to the quilts, and the video's warning about the red quilt. First a red quilt, now a purple one! What did they mean to the Underground Railroad? More specifically, what did they mean to the people of the Caine Plantation who ran the Underground Railroad?

They collected the evidence while the foot print casts dried. As they were packing up when her phone rang, and both of them nearly jumped out of their skin. Maybe, she didn't like the new ghost ring after all.

"Hello, Kathy Marconi," Kathy said, smiling. She always did when she answered the phone. There was a pause, and a confused look. "What food

spread?"

Another pause

"Hold on Phil. Chief Rose is right here. Let me tell him what you just said." She looked up at Jason, who was smiling back at her. She was glad he seemed to be more at ease with her, "Phil, the contractor, says he noticed the patrol car out front, and was wondering if you could help him, otherwise he can't bring the appliances in today. Says his men were offended by the white-dress-woman who was serving food, and wearing a slave collar. Anyway, they won't come back to the house."

"I can help. Where is he now?" he said, and then mouthed, "Sounds like the same description Jack and Ramón gave."

Kathy nodded. "He's parked at the kitchen entrance by the stable, didn't know his men weren't coming until they continued to drive passed the driveway. They called him to say they weren't staying, even if he did carry out his threat to fire them."

"We'll be right there, Phil," Jason, said leaning over to the phone.

She hung up, and they walked back to the house. Jason locked the evidence and casts in his patrol car. He paused and turned to Kathy.

"Well, let's go hear it then," he said, flipping his hand toward the house.

"Hear what?"

"Whatever ghost story he is going to tell us."

"I am more interested in whoever was in my house while I was gone. I hope he got a better description of her than bleeding-eyeball-lady. Who would break in and serve food?"

Jason shrugged. "It is bizarre."

"Do you think it could be the same person who killed Milton? Time to change the locks, historic or not. This afternoon."

Jason nodded.

They got the appliances in and hooked up before asking Phil about the food.

Kathy wasn't sure she wanted to ask him about it. What if it was another '*Dark Lady*' rant? "Can you tell me who served you food?"

Phil nodded, "A black lady, wearing a long old style dress, but she looked beautiful, not weird, just grossly out of fashion. She served my crew chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and tea with cane juice in it. The men said it was some good food. If she wasn't so strange, three of them wanted to marry her. She was...creepy...and rude."

"Creepy?" Kathy asked. "What did her dress look like?" This was indeed going to be another story about Dark Lady, but Phil seemed to have a different experience with her than the poor movers did.

"White, with rose buds, but she was wearing this offensive slave collar. Most of my men are black, so they asked her about it the first day. They were told to '*pay it no mind*.' But she used this tone of voice that suggested they dare not ask about it again. Something else that was odd. They said she actually served them. Not just setting the food out, but literally, serving it onto their plates like they were children. If she is your house lady, you have to let her go. She is beyond offensive."

"Offensive?" Kathy resisted the urge to ask if she turned into the hideous black fog Ramon saw.

"Yeah, I have some reports that the last kitchen renovation didn't go well when my men asked her about them. She said '*Mistress*' approved these renovations, and not the others, so she had run them off. She served my crew lunch every day, one masterpiece meal after another. But, on the last day, Jacques, my foremen, insisted she remove that slave collar. She said '*Massa*,' wouldn't allow it, and told him to get back to minding the field hands before he was whipped bloody. But again, she didn't sound like she was afraid. She sounded like she was ordering them back to work in the most politically incorrect way one can. She also said '*Mistress* should be told the purple quilt is out, but soon the Angry One will cause the red quilt to be hung out to dry again.'"

Kathy was beyond stunned. "Phil, I don't have a maid. And I am sorry I

didn't consider lunch for your crew, but I have no idea who that was." She pulled out her phone and texted Jason even though he was next to her. *'Purple Quilt! How did he know that?'*

Jason looked at his phone. "Phil, we just found a purple quilt at a scene that had murder evidence in it. How could you know that?" He rested his hand on his gun belt, being careful to avoid the butt of his gun.

"Oh man! It was her wasn't it! I knew it!" Phil was nearly yelling. His eyes widened and he looked around the kitchen like something was going to jump out at him.

"Who," Jason asked, but he already knew what Phil was going to say.

"The Dark Lady! I am going to...uh...get back to my deliveries...Don't want to...uh...miss...my crew at the next job. Murder, Jesus!" Phil inched toward the door, muttering about eating ghost food, and suddenly looking ill.

"Phil. It must have been an eccentric neighbor. There are no ghosts," Kathy said, trying to remain calm, although she could understand why he was upset. There was no telling what was in that food.

He whined, and continued to inch toward the door, frowning, "She only let us in, because you said it was okay. What would she have done to us, if she disagreed with you?" Panic was rising in his voice. He spun on his heel and nearly ran to his truck, without getting Kathy's delivery signature, and drove away as quickly as the delivery truck would carry him. Any thoughts of disciplining his crew for running out on him were gone.

Both Jason and Kathy stared at him as the taillights turned out onto the road.

"What do you think he knows?" Kathy asked.

"Nothing, he was here working, and prior to that he was loading the truck at Turners' Appliances." Jason fanned his arms at the finished kitchen, and then point to the invoice on the counter. "He simply didn't have time to put that quilt out. Someone told him though. I can get him to write a statement when he calms down and realizes the ghost story is nonsense."

"Who do you suppose was talking to him?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged, "Can I drive you to get new locks, after we turn in the new evidence?"

"Yup, and if you could show me where the grocery store is that would be great. Nothing like refrigeration." She opened the fridge door, and shut it.

"It would be my pleasure, Mistress."

She paused. "This isn't a flip house is it? No one will buy it. This is my home now, isn't it?"

"Appears so," he said looking around. "Could be worse. It could be a bayou cabin."

Kathy smiled, "No, it couldn't be better."

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WHERE IS THE RED QUILT

Jason made copies of some reports, and dug out a blank witness statement form. Milton's wife was at the station to give her statement.

He had picked up Kathy earlier, and then went to get Mrs. Lawrence at her mother's house. He had been lucky this morning, Mike had an appointment with his wife for an ultra sound. That meant roll call had been free of chatter about how he should ask Kathy out, and things like, 'oh, by the way here is a tray of Starbucks to drive fifteen miles out of your way to deliver.'

He thought Kathy was funny and beautiful, and he was interested in her, but there was something with the Randy Bell thing back in New York that she was holding back on. He had enough crazy...bitches... in his life. He hated to think like that, but it was truth. As the Chief he seemed to get trapped in one knee deep bog of need after another when it came to romance.

Ellen Lawrence sat in his office with Ms. Marconi. He closed the door as he entered, and then closed the blinds to the outer office for privacy.

Ellen glared at him. "I can't believe this is happening. You surely don't suspect me. I am lucky to bench press seventy-five pounds...one time. There was no way I could drag and tie up Mil," her voice began cracking with emotion, "He's at least a hundred and seventy pounds." She stopped talking and clasped her hands in her lap. The strain on her face suggested it

was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears.

Kathy smiled at Ellen, "Of course not, but we still need to talk to you."

She drew in a deep breath, ignoring Kathy, "Jason, I really don't know why I am here."

"You refused to talk to us, so I thought you might be more comfortable without your mother hanging over you, telling you what to say," he said, leaning on his desk.

He had explained to Kathy earlier that one of the advantages of being the Chief of Police in the small town he grew up in was that he knew who needed to talk at the station, and who could talk at home. Judging from the look Ellen just contorted her face into, he was right.

She burst into tears. She had had enough, of everything in her life. "Everyone abuses or controls me, except Milton. This is so not fair! You have to find the sick bastard who did this!" She was nearly screaming in his face. It was like all of her pent up emotions were coming out at once.

"We understand this is extremely difficult. We have a few questions for you. Do you think you can help us," Kathy asked kindly, with patience in her voice.

Silent, bitter tears ran down Ellen's face. She nodded, yes.

"We have found no one who thinks ill of Milton...," Kathy started.

"Mil, everyone calls him Mil," she said, through her tears.

He handed her a box of tissues. She took the entire box and put it in her lap. He glanced at Kathy, eager to see how she handled this.

Kathy continued, "No one thinks ill of him, but we don't have access to everyone he knew like you did. Can you think of someone who may have been angry with him? A client? Anyone?"

She shook her head, no, and wiped tears away. "He was obsessed with this video he made when he was a kid. He even wrote a letter about it and hand delivered it to Lauren. She was supposed to give it to you when you

closed on the house. Why didn't you call him?"

Kathy shook her head. "Lauren just gave me the closing papers. No personal notes. I don't know anyone from here. I'll go through the papers again, but I am sure there was no note in the stack. It was just a packet of official real estate papers-documents."

He stifled a smirk. It would be inappropriate, and send the wrong message. He knew Lauren well, she was one of the *bitches* he thought of earlier. Except he had never dated her. Lauren just moved to the top of the list of people he wanted to talk to today.

Then he remembered something Sandy the Curator said. Lauren and her had gone to New Orleans to see what they could salvage of the tour season. Regardless, the main tour companies needed to be aware of what happened, because angry reviews would cause the towns' sites to be removed from the tours. After all, they still had Rainier Riverboat, the town fish fry, alligator wrestling, and some of the smaller plantations.

Ellen wiped her face with a tissue, and nodded, "He kept saying there was a homicide detective he was supposed to talk to. He was supposed to tell *her* the next quilt is red."

"What does that mean?" she asked, with more than a bit of hope in her voice.

Ellen shrugged and nodded. "He didn't know. I was hoping you could tell me." She pulled out some more tissue.

"Do you have the original video he took?" Kathy sounded deflated. He knew she was hoping to find out what that quilt had specifically meant to the Caine slaves who were Marissa's agents.

She nodded and pulled it out of her purse. Kathy took it and set it on his desk. It was an old compact cassette. They would probably have to send it to the lab to view it. Unless someone still happened to have the equipment around. Perhaps Sergeant Saline would have something.

"Someone told me it was an angry spirit. Do you think that is possible?"

"Angry spirit? Who would say such a thing?" Kathy looked scandalized, like she was going to find this person cuss him out!

He stifled a smile at Kathy, she was a rescuer, not a bog of need. He refocused, scolding himself, no...she was a terrible distraction.

Ellen wiped her face. "One of the neighbors said he saw you looking at a red quilt on my deck."

"Yes, we assumed it was drying there?" Jason said, struggling not to close his eyes in anticipation of what was coming next. *And here it comes...again!*

She shook her head no. "I don't have a red quilt."

Kathy pulled out her phone showing them to him as she flipped through the photos she took. The little girl's comforter was on her bed. Milton's was under his body on the bed. She flipped to the one on the deck. There was no quilt in the photo. It was just a photo of the deck railing. She handed Jason her phone.

He stared at it, and then sat down at his desk, logging into his database with the Sheriff's department's crime scene processing unit. "The photos should be available." They came up slowly. He turned the screen so Ellen couldn't see them.

"Look." He pointed to the screen. There was no quilt. "These photos were taken before I went and picked you up," he said to Kathy. "That means the processors were still there. The property was guarded. No one could have simply walked up and hung a bright red quilt on the railing without one of the officers seeing them."

He picked up his desk phone and dialed. "Roger! Do you remember that red quilt on the deck at the Lawrence scene? Did you collect that?"

There was a pause, "OK, gone from the photo or not, you do remember seeing it, right?"

Another pause.

"Yes, I think so," Jason nodded, yes, to Kathy. There was a longer

pause, and then he turned serious again. "It's missing from evidence, too. Do you have any photos of it at all? What about the little cameras?" he said, referring to Roger's collection of cameras that he took umpteen different photographs from every angle known to man with. He must have four of them. The guy was a camera savant. The bonus of Roger handling it was that the scene was indeed photographed from every possible angle known to man. He could probably reconstruct the scene in 3-D with all the photos.

Another longer pause.

Jason sighed, "Missing from all of your cameras too? So...at least four people saw this quilt, and it's just gone...like it never existed."

A long pause. Jason nodded occasionally.

"I have no idea who could have taken it, I'll have Mike and Regina go house to house, and ask if anyone has a red quilt...OK, Roger, Thanks," Jason said, hanging up. "He's going to send a notice to Internal Affairs."

Ellen wiped her face, again. "Jason, you will find whoever did this, won't you? They took everything I have. They took the only person who made me feel I was really wanted! We were going to have a family. It was so horrible...what they did to him!" She started crying again.

"I'll leave no stone unturned, that's why I asked Ms. Marconi to consult on this. She has a great deal of experience dealing with these sorts of situations."

She pulled out more tissue. "I didn't know he knew anyone north of Shreveport, let alone in New York City. How did you meet him? Was it that insane YouTube video he uploaded that drew your attention to the Caine Plantation?"

Kathy looked stunned, "No, I didn't know him. And I didn't see the video until Mike Rose pointed it out, after I bought the house."

After Ellen calmed down, she reviewed, and then signed her written statement. She hadn't noticed anyone unusual around the neighborhood. Milton didn't deal with transit clients. Everyone was local, and everyone had known him since he was a boy, or went to high school with him, including

him, Mike, and their sister. The Lawrence family was probably one of the oldest in the area, despite missing a Cajun or French surname. And if he remembered correctly, Ellen was most likely right, Milton probably didn't know anyone North of the Parrish line, let alone the Louisiana state line.

One of his officers to took Ellen back to her mother's house.

He heard Kathy's stomach grumble, and smiled, "Would like to review the evidence over lunch at the diner?"

"Yes, I am starved."

He walked her two blocks to the diner. They ordered lunch. He kept the conversation to the case at hand, but he was becoming more and more distracted with wanted to know about Kathy. The Randal Bell case that lead to her partner's termination, and her earlier retirement didn't seem to match her personality. He would lay a year's salary that she wasn't a corrupt officer, there was simply more to the story than he could get his on his own. She would have to open about it by herself.

He sipped his water. "How do you suppose those movers are involved?"

"I don't." She shook her head. "The thing that puzzles me is the African American lady...trespasser, feeding and/or scaring people off my property. What is that all about? And don't tell me she is a ghost. She's just a clever squatter. Perhaps she killed Mr. Lawrence? Or, perhaps she is a witness? Regardless, she knows something, we have to find her."

Jason shrugged, "A lot of people believe in the Dark Lady." His knew his smile gave him a way. He could barely keep a straight face.

"Pffpht!" she nearly spit on him. "You do not believe that. How many ghosts have you seen?"

He shook his head silently laughing, trying not to spit out his bite of BLT. It would be even more undignified in uniform than if he did it out of uniform. He finally had to admit it, Mike was right, Kathy was perfect for him. He hoped she was ultimately cleared in the Bell case.

"What about Lauren, we need to talk to her. It would appear that she

has something that was meant for me." The look on her face suggested that she might be coming around to share his assessment of Lauren.

"Lauren is a crazy bat, she probably forgot. She is obsessed with that house, and was heartbroken she couldn't buy it. We can talk to her tomorrow. She is in New Orleans with Sandy from the Museum trying to salvage what they can of the town's tiny trickle of tourist business."

"Why didn't she buy it then? It was only twenty-five bucks." Kathy looked glad Lauren didn't get the house.

He smiled, she had such beautiful green eyes. Then he remembered something she said and put a spin on it. "She's a queen of idiots, who makes idiotic decisions that further causes the sort of idiocy that only the best idiots can manage to experience."

Kathy smiled and clapped her hands, "Adorable, you have been taking notes."

They finished lunch without further talk of the murder or the Dark Lady.

"How long do you have left on your shift?" Kathy asked.

He smiled and looked hopeful, "About 2 hours, but I am Chief. I pretty much set my own hours."

"Can you drop me at the Library, and then take me home at the end of your shift?"

He tried not to look deflated, "Sure, it's the least I can do for all your help."

Twenty minutes later Kathy had pulled Haunted Plantations of the Deep South, Ghosts of the Underground Railroad, Quilts and the History of Quilt Design, and A History of Louisiana Law 1840-1850: Code Civil Des Francis. The last time she visited she had focused on the house and town. Perhaps it would be easier if she focused on what the locals thought about ghosts.

She opened *Haunted Plantations of the Deep South*, and found a piece about the Blanc Plantation. The Blanc Plantation grew cotton and sugar cane. At the time, it was the nearest neighbor to the Caine Plantation. It was also the largest in the area with nearly 800 acres and 350 slaves.

Yeah, Yeah, blah, blah. Know it already. Kathy thought. Did these people just spin the same stuff from one book into the next? She turned a few pages of redundant facts, and then found a piece on a slave named Ridely, who had been Blanc's 'Whipper'.

Kathy read the story with interest. Whipper? Really? Blanc whipped so many people that he employed... no enslaved a man, and could further afford to devote him to whipping other people! Was that the legalese of the time period? Was there a whippiee too? What about a whip bearer? She couldn't believe this was ever legal in the United States.

She read on. Ridely apparently wasn't an ideal Whipper, because Blanc sold him to the Caine's. He was treated poorly by Mr. Caine.

She wondered *'Who gets a bad work review for not being an ideal Whipper! What nutter wrote this?'* She turned the book over, hoping it wasn't another Lauren job. It wasn't, she had never heard of the author.

She read on. Poor Ridely got stuck in the mud by the edge of one of the cane fields. Instead of allowing his fellow slaves to pull him out, one of the Caine overseers ordered him left over night. When they returned in the morning, Ridely had been half eaten by an Alligator.

"Hum, in Lauren's book, only bits were left. Now there was half of a body." She made a note on her tablet's file. She had created a folder on her desktop just for all this so-called...stuff. She took a photo of the article and downloaded it to the folder.

The conclusion to Ridely's story indicated that he was still angry. It is said that Ridely still haunts the area, with his whip, whipping people who dare wander around the property.

"Well, I do believe we just found another story for the inspiration of how the Lawrence murder was carried out," she whispered in her recorder. "I am sure it is also the source of the stories that the children dare each

other to cross the property with. And, I would be willing to bet that Ridely was the slave Marissa Caine rescued from the whipping post." There was no mention of Dark Lady or Marissa Caine in this story.

She turned the page. It displayed a map of the Caine plantation, from 1845, with a mark indicating where Ridely was stuck in the mud. The subdivision was located there now. She flipped to the back cover and pulled up the check-out card, and notice someone named Lee Wilson was the last person to look at this book. She took a photo of the map, and check out card. No other stories in the book related to the Caine or Blanc Plantations.

She closed the book, and pulled over, *Ghosts of the Underground Railroad*. The last person to check it out was also this Lee Wilson person. The card was dated two weeks ago. Prior to that the book had not been checked out for nearly six years. Kathy photographed the name and date of check out, and then turned her attention back to the book.

She almost immediately found the Dark Lady and her grandson Stable Boy, of the Caine Plantation.

Well, at least she had a name for Ethan, who calls their child Stable Boy? The story was the same for The Dark Lady. Her name wasn't used, Kathy wondered if that were their real names. She had only heard her referred to as the Dark Lady. Stable Boy...Ethan, she refused to call him Stable Boy. That had to be a cruel Caine name for him. Ethan was killed by accident when Dark Lady was whipped to death. She had been condemned to death, by William, for killing Mistress Marissa Henning-Caine. William had recorded in his journal that his son, Percy, believed Dark Lady had killed her as revenge for refusing to continue to support Dark Lady's Underground Railroad activities.

There was nothing new, except that was a direct quote from William's journal and not a repeat of what someone else said. That meant he believed it enough to write it down. She wondered if the journal still existed.

The next paragraph addressed Dark Lady 'stealing' Caine money to buy Ridely off the whipping post.

Kathy frowned. That did not make sense, even for the time period. What black slave could buy another off the whipping post? For the sake of

argument, even if Dark Lady did take the money, which Kathy sincerely doubted, how could she have explained that amount of cash? This story had a definite slant toward the Caine's in it. She flipped the book over, it was written by Jessica Caine. "Humph."

She was tempted to put the book down, but read on. As a punishment for Dark Lady's part in the Ridely incident, Mr. Caine had the blacksmith permanently fit her with a slave collar, causing severe burns on her back and neck, since the collar had not cooled all the way. It wasn't red hot, but still hot enough to burn skin. The blacksmith nearly drowned her soaking her head to quell her screaming. She was chained to the whipping post every night for a month.

"OK, if she was chained to the whipping post every night, how did she kill Marissa?" Kathy whispered, making another note. She strongly suspected cyanide. It was possible for it to be delivered later, meaning the killer did not have to be present to kill. Even if Dark Lady baked it into Marissa's food, one of the many plantation children could have eaten it, or another adult slave. It was an awful risk with odds that were too high on killing the wrong person. Perhaps it was accidental, or meant for William? Regardless, if Dark Lady poisoned Marissa, she would have had to deliver it personally to make sure it reached the right person.

She checked the bibliography of the book to see where the sources came from; William's journal, the local newspapers and house accounting records were listed, as well as an interview with the author's great nephew, Arthur Caine.

She pulled over the legal book where she found a reference to the Missouri Compromise Act of 1820. Lauren had mentioned it in her book. She wanted to see the whole act, not the Lauren blurb. Apparently on March 6, 1820 The Compromise admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state. A law prohibiting slavery above the north line of the United States was also passed. It had been wildly controversial at the time. For the time, it was extremely rare for pro-slave and anti-slave activists to have such a stage for both of them to speak. The topic was just too hot. It would be like having Atheists and Christians show up together for a rally on religion. A footnote to the rule ordered states to return runaway slaves to their masters. As a result, there was a lot of follow up acts and court decisions following

the Missouri Compromise. The most famous being the later Supreme Court decision regarding Dred Scott in 1857, which had in effect on all acts of congress to make slavery unconstitutional or constitution. They could only permit slavery (owning property and being secure in owning it) and not prohibit it. The old precedent of *once free always free* was overturned. This further inflamed the political climate.

This meant effectively that Free states would have to return the property to the proper owner, no matter anyone's feelings on the matter. And they would have to do it at their own expense. It sounded so innocent, until you considered what the *property* was; a human being desiring to be as free as the principles the United States was founded on. In reality, they were ordering the Free states to extradite/return runaway slaves home.

She found another piece, Lincoln had run for President, not against Douglas, but against the Dred Scott rule. And, it was a cause dear the hearts of his constituents, who obviously turned out in droves to vote for him. Or more to the point, against Dred Scott, since Lincoln had been so passionate about it.

Kathy made a note: This initial time frame of the Missouri Compromise would have been about 8 years after the Caine's moved into the Plantation. Given the level and length of national debate on the matter, Marissa would have had enough time to secure safe contacts to get her branch of what would one day become the Underground Railroad secured in this part of the South. It would have been more complicated after the Compromise, because Free states were ordered to return runaway slaves. However, the Compromise was not equally enforced in all regions, and not at all in other states. Knowing what states to send the runaways to, and not to, would have been critical to the success of her operation.

Kathy thought for a moment. Marissa was killed in 1846, she would have been middle-aged. If she took strategic advantage of the Missouri Comprise Act when it was enacted, she had twenty-six years of experience in running people to freedom.

She photographed the bibliography of the other book. She wondered if William's journal still existed. She would be interested to read his private thoughts, meant for no one else. As a bonus, he recorded what he did to

Dark Lady, and what he believed about happened. She wanted to read it first hand, with no paraphrasing by the book authors.

She asked the librarian about it. It had been donated to the museum, and destroyed during the recent break-in and vandalism. Several pages had been ripped out. The other pages were sprayed painted hot pink. The curator was attempting to restore what little could be restored.

Kathy shook her head, "What a shame."

The librarian sighed and shook her head, "It was a dreadful loss. Luckily we had copies. We are having a historical replica made, but the restoration company in Boston has the copies. I am afraid it will be weeks before we can review them."

Kathy nodded. This might not be the oldest cold case in the state, but it was certainly the most complicated and convoluted one. Why wouldn't they have copied the copies before sending them off? She had a textbook at home on cold cases. She would have to check into it later, to see if there were any good ideas for generating leads in cases as old as this one.

Funny, she thought to herself. That was the book that had fell and drew her attention a couple of days ago. She put all of the books back. The quilt books had been a mixed bar. Two were puff-pieces about the quilt squares, blocks as they were called, and what they meant to the Underground Railroad. The third story mirrored Jason's assessment of the quilt meanings. Meaning no code could be proven, because if it had been...they would have been caught, further meaning, there would be no Underground Railroad. Did he say his mother was a quilter? Maybe she could ask Mrs. Rose about quilting history.

For now, Kathy stuck with her original assessment; just because something was vague didn't mean it wasn't true, it just meant it couldn't be used in court. And since, the quilts were never entered against anyone, Kathy smiled, no one *'else'* was able to decode it.

As Jason said, 'Traffickers weren't known for keeping logs that advertised their routes. They kept codes, and only essential *'eyes only'* people knew what the codes meant.'

Even if the other two quilt books were pure puff-pieces, they brought needed attention to a forgotten atrocity, and how people coped with it. Besides, vague or not, the quilts did have meaning to someone. She just needed to figure out what they meant to Dark Lady and Marissa. All of these books were entirely different than Lauren's attempt to glamorize everything that happened at the Caine Plantation. All three books used metaphor and deduction to keep history alive and clear up as much of the vagueness as they could, without it becoming a lie. Lauren's, as Jason put it, had the equivalent of unicorns and ponies as the basis of her reasoning. The more Kathy thought about it, the more she wondered how Lauren even got the book published.

"Can you help me find a publisher of a certain book?" she asked the librarian.

The librarian nodded. "Which one?"

"Lauren Grayson's."

She smiled a tell-tale smile of polite disapproval, and pulled a copy of Lauren's book showing Kathy the copyright page with the publisher.

Kathy grinned. She was going to have to throw that book out. "Self-published, with no checks and balances for accuracy."

The librarian shrugged. "I heard she spent almost \$8,000 to have a vanity press print this. She could not get past the fact checkers with traditional publishers. Regardless, we keep all local works."

Kathy smiled. She needed to 'talk' to some slaves, or at least read their testimonies. "Do you have any with interviews of the slaves?"

The Librarian helped her dig out some old books that documented the stories of the slaves who had lived in the area. *The Tales of Sugar Cane Negroes*. It was published in 1932 by Leon Lacompte. She looked at the 'borrow' card. Lee Wilson was also on this card. She photographed it, and made a note to check if the Lacompte reporters were ancestors. *Perhaps chasing the Caine's' was a family obsession?* And since it seemed to be passed down she was sure if there were any living descendants they had to have inherited the private journals.

"Did you help the person who looked at this last?"

"Someone looked at this?" The librarian frowned. "People usually don't seek to remember what the actual slaves have to say, they usually prefer Hollywood's stories." She looked at the card, "I'll go ask Megan, she is our part time librarian." She paused, "The one on Hattie Rainier, has a great-great-grandson who is the Sheriff of this Parrish. He may have some firsthand stuff in his family history collection." She headed toward the check-out desk.

"Thank you. I definitely need to know what the slaves thought. The Hollywood stuff is fogging up everything," Kathy said smiling, and taking the book over to the table she had been working at. This was the third time she read something that mentioned Sheriff Rainier.

She opened the book to the first testimony. It was for Marie Edwards. She was 74 at the time of the book's printing. That would have made her a little girl, almost a toddler just prior to and during the Civil War. Too young to remember first hand.

She flipped to the next one. "Here's Hattie." Hattie Rainier, was 92 years old at the printing. That would have made her a young adult just prior to the Civil War. This was someone with a fully formed memory, and opinions to match.

Hattie was the cook for the Blanc Plantation. She married Bo Rainier, a freed slave from Rainier Riverboat Company. Hattie's mother used to take her with her to visit Dark Lady at the Caine Plantation.

Kathy made a note: Could Hattie's mother have been a co-conspirator in the fledgling Underground Railroad?

Hattie relayed the tale of poor Ridely, adding that he had been bought off the whipping post, by Mrs. Caine. *Ha! I knew it!* He was to be whipped for getting one of Hattie's House Girls pregnant without the express permission of Master Blanc.

Kathy smirked, "Apparently no unauthorized mouths to feed were allowed on the Blanc Plantation."

She smiled, so, the Whipper becomes the whipped, or would that be Whippie since he didn't actually get it? Someone enjoyed getting those orders, no doubt. The girl involved had been starved and then beaten. She later miscarried, and after that was not able to have children. Blanc was definitely a bastard, Kathy thought frowning at the text.

The reporter asked about Dark Lady. Hattie would have been 7 when Mary, that was Dark Lady's real name, died. Beyond adding Dark Lady's real name, she didn't really have anything new to add to what Kathy already knew. However, Hattie was first person, so she confirmed several legends as more credible historical facts than they were fifteen minutes ago. Dark Lady had been her code name, but eventually everyone called her Dark Lady.

Hattie thought Mistress Caine went mad, and was killed, presumably by Dark Lady. Dark Lady was shackled, and then whipped to death with a terrible razor whip. And, Stable Boy died the same day, in the stable on the Caine Plantation, but Hattie didn't know how he died. She had heard several different tales about his death.

Kathy made copies of Hattie's testimony for her growing collection. She would have to get a binder for all the research, or at least start scanning them into her tablet's file, so they could all be together.

The librarian returned. "Ms. Marconi, Megan, said she helped a woman who said she was writing a college paper. She had a class schedule."

"Thank you," Kathy said smiling, "Why would she show the librarian a class schedule? What difference would that make?"

The librarian shrugged, "Sometimes they do it to coax more help out of us; translation, they want us to do their research for them because they don't know how. So they play dumb freshman, and then ask for a lot of help. Megan says this lady seemed a bit older, about your age. She had very short blond hair. Beyond that, Megan says she doesn't remember."

"Thank you," Kathy said, helping the librarian gather the books up. She tried hard to ignore the 'a bit older, about your age' comment.

She waited out front for Jason, thinking that she had not really been in

the stable/garage since she had bought the place. She had just looked in, and moved on, during the move in process. Perhaps there was a small chance some part of it was still intact from Dark Lady's time period?

Jason pulled up in the patrol car almost immediately. "It was getting slow, thought I would just sit here, and watch that stop sign," he said, holding up his ticket book.

"Making friends, are we?" she said, smiling.

He nodded smiling. "The town's people actually get upset if I don't write them. I can't have them gathering outside my office with pitchforks and torches. Besides, obnoxious traffic enforcement keeps burglaries and robberies in check. And, to answer your next question, no, there were no tickets the night of the museum break-in. I already checked that. And, the mover's ticket was the only one from the night of the Lawrence murder. I had it dismissed for him. Poor dude has been through enough."

She smiled, and remembered how many times she had found a suspect based on the traffic tickets they got trying to speed away. It would have been faster for the suspects to just leave their license at the scene, along with their place of employment, in case the detectives couldn't find them at home. She also found several witnesses that way. If it hadn't been for the fact that she knew where the movers were, they would be prime suspects right now because of that ticket.

"Home, my lady?" Jason asked.

"Yes," she said, continuing to smile. She updated him on her new information, and the fact that some information was now considered confirmed as facts, regarding Dark Lady and Ethan-Stable Boy.

Kathy looked at his car computer. "Are you logged in?"

"Yes, writing tickets, remember?" he said, turning the computer's stand to face her.

She ran Lee Wilson's name in the system, and received a bunch of hits. *Too many*. She narrowed the search to this state only, again there were too many. Apparently Lee and Wilson are as popular in the South as John

Smith was elsewhere! There were hundreds, men, women, all races, no way to sort them out. It was a GAM as her grandmother used to call things like this. *God Awful Mess!*

"Got something?"

"No, it is probably an alias anyway. Someone had checked out several of the books I was looking at today two weeks ago under the name of Lee Wilson."

"Really, our psycho history buff?" Jason said, raising his eyebrows. "I had never even fathomed checking library cards."

"It was a lucky find." She shrugged, as they pulled into Kathy's driveway. "The stable," she said quickly, sounding more desperate than she wanted to. She recollected herself. "I thought it might be a good idea to check out the stable. Since the history is so strong there. Maybe Milton's killer left something there to feed the ghost story? Especially since several pages of William's journal was missing." She didn't want Jason to leave, but was too shy to ask him to stay.

He nodded and parked closer to the stable than the kitchen door.

There was nothing of the old stable left. It had basically been converted into a modern ten car garage, with enough space above it to have plans drawn for an apartment, but right now they were just open rafters. Even the hay lofts were gone. Someone, at one point, had plans for this garage. Too bad Kathy didn't have the extra money to finish it. It would make an excellent temporary domestic violence shelter.

"Dinner? I might not do sweet tea as well as the diner? But there is no sense in letting the new appliances sit there unused."

"Sure." Jason said, smiling.

He asked her at least a hundred questions about growing up in New York City, in particular Manhattan. She kept to the surface details, and was able to throw in some cool police war stories to avoid talking about her parents. Luckily he never asked.

It was dark when he got up to leave. "Chief or not, I still have roll-call in the morning."

"Thank you for staying. Next time, I want to hear about how Mike got beat up for not staying overnight in the attic." She pointed upstairs.

He smiled and looked at the floor. "I only threw water balloons on him, in the morning when I found him sleeping in his own bed."

She laughed, "When you're sleeping, that counts as being beaten up."

He laughed, "You should have heard him scream."

She leaned up and gave him a kiss on his cheek. "I look forward to next time."

He looked very shy, but smiled. "Me too."

She was a bit hurt by the fact that he simply left without further...well, without further anything.

In the morning Kathy entered the small street front office of the Historical Society. The bell jingled on its spring. Jason had waited in his office, stating that Kathy would do better without him.

"Hello, Lauren, Do you have a minute?" Kathy said smiling, and trying not to look like she was being fake, as she greeted Lauren.

Lauren smiled, "Sure."

Kathy noticed a photo on her desk. She had seen it before, but it didn't have meaning until now. "Is that Jason Rose?"

The frame sported a photo of Jason in shorts and a tank top holding a football, Lauren was hanging off his shoulder looking up at him love sick. He was wearing sunglasses so his expression was harder to read. *Boy Howdy, she was bony in that bikini.* If Kathy was that skinny, she would wear a one piece to avoid looking emaciated. Kathy loved her body. She had actual curves to fill out a bikini very nicely.

Lauren smiled, and her eyes beamed. "Yes." Then her look turned darker, "How do you know my Jason?"

"I was consulting on a case. I didn't know Jason had a girlfriend." She was feeling a bit disappointed. She had thought her and Jason had hit it off well. Perhaps that was why he didn't come with her to talk to Lauren; he's stepping out on her. She stopped herself. No he isn't, nothing happened, she gave him a peck on the cheek that he barely reacted to before leaving. Additionally, Jason did not speak very fondly of Lauren...the *Queen of Idiots engaging in idiocy* was a phrase she had heard him use more than once over the last two days.

"Jason and I go way back." She smiled again, picking up the frame, hugging it, and then setting it back down. "I heard about poor Milton Lawrence. I remembered something when I saw the case." She pulled a note card in an envelope out of her desk. "Mil gave me this, said to give it to you with the closing papers, but I forgot. I was just so happy to have the house saved."

Kathy smiled, "The murder was two days ago, why not hand it over when you remembered." She hadn't mentioned the murder, but supposed it was a safe assumption on Lauren's part that she was indeed consulting on the Lawrence murder, and not the Museum burglary. It also did not escape Kathy's attention that Lauren didn't deny being Jason's girlfriend.

"I was busy, and didn't think it was important."

Kathy wanted to call B.S. on her, but smiled instead. "Yes, Jason said you were in New Orleans."

Her eyes darkened and her tone of voice became accusatory. "Why would Jason discuss anything about me with you?"

Kathy smiled at Lauren's over reaction. There was nothing going on between the two. It was time to find out how deep into her fantasy she was living. "He said you wrote a book about my house. I bought and read it to learn more about the place." she continued smiling as pleasantly as she could.

Lauren beamed. "He is such a sweetheart. I just love him so." She patted

the frame.

Kathy smiled and opened the note card. It read, 'Someone is after me. I am told the homicide detective can help.' It had his business card with 'please call me because the next quilt is red, but I don't' know what that means' scribbled on it. Kathy sighed. If Lauren had given this to her the first day, Milton would most likely still be alive, because the killer would have been alerted that the authorities, or perceived authorities knew what was planned. Her face fell.

"What is it?" Lauren asked.

Kathy tucked the note into her tablet's case. "Nothing, just something I wish I knew before he died."

"I am sorry, but I am not a delivery person, and Mil knows where the plantation is. He could have delivered it himself." Lauren folded her arms, and leaned back hard on her heel.

"Wow," Kathy said stunned. "Of all the cold blooded things to say. The man was whipped to death. He and his daughter were being stalked, and he tried to get a message to me for help. A message you conveniently forgot about. So, what do you know about the stalker?"

"What?" Lauren stiffened. "Nothing."

"Then why did you withhold evidence? Most people would have turned it in right away." It was extremely suspicious that she did not, and then follow it up with that attitude. *What a bitch.*

"Get out. I have nothing to add to this conversation. I am not the Post Office of La Famille Lawrence." She pointed to the door.

Kathy smiled a ridiculous fake smile. "I know you are not the Post Office of La Famille Lawrence. Please let me apologize for thinking you were human. By the way, you and Jason should have an updated photo. He looks like he is still in high school there." She paused for a moment, giving an overtly thoughtful look to Lauren. "Seems like you would have at least called your lover, to let him know you had the letter from Milton. I wonder what sort of appreciation he would have shown at the help with the case."

She walked out leaving the door open.

"Born in a barn!"

"Yes, proud of it." As annoyed as Kathy was, Lauren did have a point. Milton was a back-door neighbor, why didn't he just walk over and talk to her? Did the incident in Junior High scare him that bad? More to the point, what was Lauren's role in this? Kathy wasn't buying the *'forgot it'* story.

LOUISE CAINE-MATHEWS

A week later, Kathy put on some flip flops with her brown and turquoise maxi-dress. It was going to be seventy-four degrees here today, and 28 degrees back home. She posted it on her Facebook page, and immediately got several invitations for company. She smiled. She did not miss the cold! She typed back, *'when the house is done, everyone can visit. I can't wait to see y'all'*. She laughed at the use of the word y'all. That was not a word her friends would know her to say. Three 'likes' popped up immediately.

She turned her attention back to getting ready for the afternoon.

Jason had asked her to something called a Town Fish Fry. She had read about it in the copy of the historical newspaper that had Percy's arrest recorded in it. She was pleased to find out that the town still meets on the banks of a small nearby river. There was live music. They played games, quilted, danced, ate, and of course fished. The fresh catch was deep fried right there. Usually it was catfish, but whatever was on the line was on the menu. Jason had teased her about eating a baby gator once. This was the first one of the long season that ended with whatever weekend fell after Thanksgiving.

The thought of spending time with Jason, that didn't relate to the Lawrence murder, was nice, more than nice. Still, she was afraid to be excited. Kathy, men, and relationships didn't seem to be a good mix. But, there was something different about Jason. She wanted him to like her back. She had never wanted, or cared about that with anyone else.

The twisty bell rang downstairs. She loved the sound. She had found it at a salvage store downtown, and installed it yesterday evening. It wasn't period for when the house was built, but it was super old and super cool to have the key-twist door bell.

"Coming!" she called, trotting down the stairs.

She opened the door, "My dear Mister Rose, you do look adorable in civilian clothing," she said, with a really bad southern accent.

He smiled, and straightened his polo shirt. "That is supposed to be my greeting. Your dress looks incredible," he said, leading her to his jeep.

"Jeep, I would have figured you for a big red pick-up guy."

"That's Mike, although with all the kids he and his wife seem to keep having, a pick-up won't be his vehicle of choice for long."

At the fish fry everyone was curious to meet the '*Yankee who bought the ole spook house*'. Everyone was friendly, but when Kathy suggested they come to visit, they somehow had to go find someone they hadn't seen yet at the fish fry. She hadn't really expected all of them to come and visit. What she really wanted to know was, how superstitious were these people, and what did they believe about the ghost stories? So far, it was just a rambling sample of everything she already knew with varying degrees of exaggeration.

They all brought over samplings of their signature dishes for her to eat, which included no less than six varieties of something called gumbo. It looked horrendous, but Kathy had politely tried each one, and was thankful it tasted better than it looked. She was on the fast track to being a connoisseur of gumbo.

Jason helped his nephew in a three legged race against Mike and Mike's elder son. Jason won; probably because he hugged his nephew close enough to his hip to pick him up as he darted to the finish line. His nephew had laughed wildly, happy to finally beat his older brother at something.

Mike's wife, Sarah was nice, and very glad that Jason seemed to find someone he was interested in. She had a stroller with their two year old daughter, and was visibly expecting another.

Kathy thought, Man, for twenty-nine, Mike sure did hit the ground running when it came to getting his family settled. She watched Jason and his nephew get ready for another heat in the three-legged race.

"You know, for a minute, I thought Jason and Lauren had a thing," Kathy said, glad they didn't. Jason was far too good of a catch for that bat of a woman.

Sarah smiled, "*That* Lauren Grayson is way too interested in Jason. He wants nothing to do with her. It is so embarrassing. There was some sort of stalking incident that Lauren describes as a bad break-up, but Jason denied having any sort of relationship with her at all. Apparently the incident involved her sitting nude, and spread-eagle on his desk; that is what I heard, not what Jason said. Jason threatened to lock her up for trespassing, after pointing out that she was a bony bitch; not a bitch to be boned."

Kathy smiled to herself, Good old fashioned, small town gossip. "She seems so stiff and prudish."

"Not when it comes to Jason. She has eyes only for him. Other men have tried to date her, only to be rebuffed."

Sarah continued filling Kathy in on Jason's past. "Lauren called him, texted him, and even sent him a snail mail letter begging him...for something, but no one knew for sure what it was. Everyone assumed it was romantic."

Kathy couldn't picture the Jason she knew being interested in Lauren.

"There was a point in time when we worried she really was stalking him," Sarah said, concerned. "But, he finally fired her, and she seemed to back off."

"Fired her?" Kathy thought of the photo on Lauren's desk, and the fact that she said '*my Jason*'.

Sarah nodded, "She did school and parking meter patrol. He never said why he fired her, just that he did, and that it was a private human resources issue. I would bet it was related to that spread eagle thing." Sarah cringed at the thought.

"Really, she doesn't seem like the type to be in police work, in any capacity." Kathy was stunned. She had met tons of officers in an off-duty capacity, not one had failed to show a kindred spirit. Lauren just buzzed through that closing, an ex-officer, to a retired officer, and never said a word. Was that what Lauren was hiding? That also made the fact the Lauren did not call in the *forgotten* note card even more suspicious. Even a poor officer, would have thought to call that in, right away. If nothing else, to look like a better officer.

"She wasn't interested in police work. She just wanted more attention from Jason than he was willing to give her. And, training her would force them to be together. In fact, until he met you, we figured he might be a closet gay. You know, hadn't admitted it to himself let alone anyone else."

"Really? Well, for my own selfish sake, I hope he isn't." She thought of how he reacted to the peck on the cheek she gave him. Most of the guys she dated, who she did that to, took advantage of the invitation to give her a deeper kiss, not flee.

"He has had really bad luck with women. The only long term relationship was in college, with a cheerleader. She actually tried to shoot him when he broke up with her. He called the campus police on her, but she accused him of rape, and said she tried to shoot him in self-defense. He had to drop football during the investigation. He ended up changing schools, and switched majors to pre-law. Of course, the football scholarship was gone, so he started part time with the police force here since his new college was closer to home. He eventually finished his Master's in Public Administration."

"She tried to shoot him?" Kathy couldn't believe it. Jason was such a sweetheart.

Stacey nodded, "Yes. It ended up being ruled a false report, but the damage was already done to Jason. He never sought out another long term relationship again. The really sick part was nothing happened to her, even after she admitted lying. She stayed on the cheerleading team, kept membership in her sorority, and doesn't have the criminal record or jail time she deserved. For God's Sake, she tried to shoot him."

"Poor Jason," Kathy said wondering if she should come cleaner than she had about what happened with her partner Randy. She was crazy about Jason, and didn't want him to think she was keeping things from him, on purpose. She just wanted to move on and live the new life she was building. Minus the hideous murder, of course.

Jason came jogging up, "Come on, let's dance!" he said, reaching for her. She smiled and allowed herself to be pulled away from the conversation.

They danced until Kathy was too tired to stand up, but she refused to let go of Jason, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Tired?" he asked, caressing her back.

"Yes and no, just a worn out *city dweller*," she said, leaving her head on his shoulder.

He led her by the waist over to the 'family' blanket. The others were at the bounce house, and Jason's parents were visiting his sister, who had moved to Chicago with her husband and their two children. It was just the two of them for the moment.

"Let's rest a minute," he said, helping her down. He sat down next to her, and leaned over, kissing her. It was just a small peck on the mouth, since they were in public.

She kissed him back. She was mindful of a set of eyes on them.
Awkward!

"Don't get too attached," the terse voice of Lauren Grayson stated. "He loves the chase, but nothing beyond that."

"Go away," Jason said, trying to hold his anger, as he pointed in a direction that indicated far away. "When will you back off? I could bury your reputation to the point that you would have to leave town, so why do you constantly provoke me?"

"Tease," Lauren said, glaring at Kathy.

Kathy took out her phone and switched it to camera mode. "Can you take a photo of us? I need an updated one for my desk."

She gave Kathy the finger, and then spun on her heel as she stalked off.

"Why is she looking at me? I am not teasing you." She almost made an offer she couldn't take back. Since he seemed to be somewhat of a gentleman, and had been victimized by women in the past. He probably wouldn't appreciate a blatant 'take me now' offer.

He smiled, showing nearly all of his teeth. "I really love the way you take on the role of Queen Bitch."

"Oh honey, she isn't even qualified to be a jester in the Court of this Queen Bitch. I told you what she said about the Post Office La Famille Lawrence."

He was about to kiss her again, when a very old African American woman rode up to them on her scooter. "Ignore her, young lady. She has always been after our star quarterback here."

Jason smiled, "Kathy, this is Louise Caine-Mathews, a descendant of one of the Caine slaves; and she was the Principal of my high school. She got me started in football." He turned back to Louise. "Kathy bought the old Caine Plantation."

Kathy smiled, "I am pleased to meet you." Cool this lady was about a hundred! Perhaps she had even spoken with some of her older relatives when she was young about the Caine plantation. She could be a living link to the long deceased witness, Hattie. It would be as close to first hand as she could get with Dark Lady's case.

She smiled, "I heard from my great grandson that you bought that old spook house."

"Yes, by accident, but I am glad I am here now," she said, patting Jason's knee. He smiled, looking very shy.

"They say Dark Lady and her grandson haunt the place," she said, looking nervous.

"I have heard that. Dark Lady's real name is Mary, correct?"

She nodded and pulled out an old hand sketched portrait, and handed it

to Kathy. It appeared to have been professionally preserved. "I am 102. This is my great aunt, Mary. However the field hands called her Dark Lady. At first it was a code name for her, but then it became common, and she adopted it as her name. Her niece, my grandmother, used to tell me stories about how Dark Lady was murdered by her master, but that he got away with it. I have read William Caine's journal, and I know what he wrote. Percy thought she killed his mother, but I say hogwash. I am sorry, I must sound like a crazy old woman, just riding up here and babbling on."

"No, please continue," Both Jason and Kathy said in unison. The second kiss long forgotten.

Kathy looked at the roughly sketched photo. Dark Lady was a thin woman with long braided hair. She was very roughly sketched wearing the white rosebud dress Phil, Jack and Ramón had described. She looked...like she was in charge. Her posture, as drawn, was very authoritative. The only thing missing was the silver slave collar. Why hadn't Lauren included this drawing in her puff-piece? This would have been an excellent photographic display for her book, or even a cover for it. Although, it is possible Louise didn't like Lauren and wouldn't have trusted her with such a family treasure.

"She was so proud of that dress. It was new, Marissa bought it for her as a gift. I had heard the two of them were very close," she sighed, "I also heard you were helping Jason with the Lawrence murder investigation. They said poor Mil had suffered the same as my sweet Dark Lady. You know, Mil was in my last graduating class, the year I retired from the school system. He was such a dear boy, and a great student."

Jason stiffened. "How did you hear that Kathy was helping? Just who is *'they'*?"

"It's a small town, sweetheart. We all know everything, and you know good and well who *'they'* are, everyone. You should know that by now," Louise said. She was probably the only person in town who could call the Chief of Police 'sweetheart' like she was talking to a child, and not get a good cussing in return, and that would include his own mother.

Jason huffed, but remained silent. Mrs. Mathews was just as *principal-like* as she was when he was in school. With her age, he just assumed the

behavior was built in, but now with what he knew about Dark Lady, it seemed to be in her DNA.

Kathy grinned at him, and then turned back to Louise. "Were you told other stories about Dark Lady as you grew up? Did you know Hattie, from the Blanc plantation?"

"Yes, and yes, Both Hattie, and my grandmother, but neither believed Dark Lady was a murderer. According to my grandmother Dark Lady loved her mistress like a sister, and would never do such a thing. Hattie thinks that evil Percy killed his mother, and later his father to steal his own inheritance. He must have shifted the blame to Dark Lady for his mother's death, in order to get away with it. She also thought Percy killed Stable Boy for trying to beg on Dark Lady's behalf. He was only six, there was no way he was attempting to free her from two, armed, grown men. He couldn't possibly have been a threat. I'll bet they killed him too, however being stable trained, even at six he would have been a terrible financial loss for the Caine's."

"Evil?" Kathy had a good idea why Louise would think Percy was evil, but she didn't want to assume. She wanted to know for sure what Louise thought about Percy. She also found it interesting that Hattie's conclusions were left out of the testimony in the book of slave tales. Was it an editing decision, or did Hattie keep a secret about how she felt, not wanting to talk to a white reporter?

"Dirty bastard, pardon my language, kidnapped runaways and sold them south! To the islands! If slavery was bad in the U.S, it was ten times worse in the islands. I have also heard from my grandmother that he also trafficked poor whites into island slavery too. It didn't matter to him, he was an equal opportunity hater. If they could turn a profit on a person, he put them on the slave ships south. Hattie said Blanc had taken part in that criminal venture, but didn't know Percy had been kidnapping his own slaves. The old fool. Upstanding citizens, those two. Percy literally fooled Dark Lady into luring Blanc slaves deeper into slavery by promising a trip north on the Underground Railroad. He used her, and that was how he avoided Blanc finding out. Someone should have stuck a pitchfork in both their chests while they slept. It was said that when he told Dark Lady what she had been 'accidentally' doing for him she died from heartbreak long

before the whip took her.

She paused to finally take a breath. "It is also said that Percy even prostituted his own daughter, by force, to Blanc. She became pregnant and moved north, claiming that her 'husband' had been killed by the flu while on route north. She spent her days in a clothing sweatshop trying to raise Blanc's illegitimate child, who eventually moved back here and married, but that side of the family trail is cold."

"Gee-Gee," A teenage boy came running up.

Louise ignored him for the moment. "I know Percy arranged to have Dark Lady killed to keep her quiet, because at that point she knew everything he was up to. She had to have known. If you can find anything in the storage space in the library bookcases, I would like to see the record set straight. Even if justice can't be done, it can at least be known. She doesn't deserve to be '*officially*' remembered that way." She turned to the boy. "I am coming. Let me get the brake off this thing."

Kathy nodded, "I will check."

"Thank you, Ms. Marconi," she said, speeding off on her scooter. "Come on Lyle, let's try the sweet tea booth. I heard they had raspberry tea. I do so love raspberries."

Ms. Marconi! Jason had just used Kathy's first name when they were introduced! *Welcome to small town life, Kathy!*

"Shall I take you home to comb the library?" Jason asked, there was a hopeful sound in his voice.

"Yes, as long as you help me check it out."

A half an hour later they ran up Kathy's stairs two at a time to get to the library.

She scolded herself, *Stupid! Kathy! You had this library the whole time and have devoted no time to it!* There were old outdated legal books from the 1970's and 80's on every shelf, except the back center one. It had old books there, really old ones.

She pulled a '*William Shakespeare, Primary Reader*' out, the copyright was 1798. The intro stated it was for 'young scholars learning the principles of fine literature.' Then it occurred to her, the Caine's weren't just wealthy, they were members of the super wealthy class. They had a media presence who carefully danced around controversial stories. They had a library of printed books. These shelves had been stuffed with them! There were no free book downloads from the Internet! This must have been the equivalent of tens of thousands of dollars' worth of books.

She carefully replaced the book and pulled out another, '*Handwriting for Young Hands*'. Copyright 1817. A folded up piece of paper fell out on the floor. *Percy Gerrell Caine age 6* was inscribed on the inside cover of the book. Each of Percy's children had their own set of school books. It was an extraordinary indication of wealth for the time period.

Kathy picked up the paper, and held it so Jason could see it too.

"1846

William is so angry with me, but I could not let that horrible Blanc beat that young man for loving his girl. William has cut me off from the money, all of it. He claims he will control every dime from here on out. Despite my fine things, I am as poor as a church mouse. It is no matter. I don't need anything.

Percy is also angry that I cannot give him his allowance. He blames poor Dark Lady for influencing me, but the truth is that I convinced her to help me. I refuse to call her Mary, as Percy has renamed her, again. He even beat two of the field hands for calling her Dark Lady where he could hear it. He claims there is power in allowing a slave to choose their name, so a new name should be beaten into them. William must have taught him that.

I do not know who I am writing this to, but everything is not as it seems here at the Caine Plantation, and I have no more endurance to fight against it.

May the Lord have mercy on me for my impulsiveness with Blanc! I should have stood strong. Now more will suffer because of me! Even Ridely's poor innocent baby! Everything thing that has happened is entirely my fault, because I was impatient. I just could not let Blanc do it. I don't' know what came over me! My actions have exposed everything!

I have failed. I am married to a monster, and gave birth to his fork-tongued, demon spawn. William is raising Percy to continue in their family's sadistic ways! I wish I could act as a proper Christian, and not hate them both, but I cannot help myself. If anyone deserves hating it is me, for ruining everything! How could I have been a party in raising my beautiful baby boy to be such a monster!

I am guilty of murder, no differently than if I killed them myself!

Lord Jesus, please forgive me for this, for I cannot take it anymore.

Marissa Henning-Caine?

"Is it just me, or does this read like a suicide note?" Jason asked.

"It does, but it wasn't left anywhere where anyone could find it. There is a dark spot on the corner. We should have it tested, to see what it is. Perhaps she poisoned herself to death? I am suspecting cyanide."

Jason nodded. "Maybe Louise is on to something? Perhaps Percy hid it, and let William think Dark Lady was guilty of accidentally killing Marissa? That would have taken care of Dark Lady for him. After all, he wasn't the master, William was. She must have known enough about him to make his life very hard if the Sheriff discovered his trafficking, or Blanc found out about his double cross, or, any number of things, including Blanc's own child, by Percy's daughter. If Dark Lady and Marissa were as close as everyone says, then what one knew, so did the other. Marissa would have learned that she wasn't helping the slaves, but leading them further into slavery. It must have pushed her over the edge."

"Perhaps. It does sound like something Percy would do, especially given Marissa's assessment of him in her note. However, she didn't really speak lovingly of either of them. Sounds like she regretted having ever met William. I wonder if it was love, or if it was an arranged marriage?"

She pulled a few more books off the shelf and set them on the floor. "Seriously! The lawyers didn't move these books around! Surely someone has moved them in over 100 years! Dust much! All these books are stacked on the shelf, like Dark Lady set them here yesterday afternoon." What she didn't know was the lawyers were afraid to touch the books, ever again.

"Wait," Jason said leaning over into the shelf, "Look." He pulled off a piece of the wide wooden trim to reveal a dainty little door knob like one would expect to find on an old medicine chest.

"What is it?"

"Secret comp..." He almost said compartment, but the entire bookcase released, "Room...No, staircase" He corrected as he opened the door/shelf to reveal a landing for a narrow staircase very much like the one in the kitchen. He stepped inside, "Goes up to the third floor, and it looks like down to the parlor off the living room?"

They went upstairs, and came out close to the little window where both Mike and Jack said they had seen Ethan. The book/linen shelf closed and latched behind them. Kathy leaned in and looked out what she had come to think of as Ethan's window. Jason leaned in behind her.

"We always end up, right here," he said, leaning in close enough behind her to smell her hair. It smelled clean and fruity.

"Well, we know, Ethan didn't stay here. He was a boy and lived in the quarters of the stable. Do you suppose this was where Dark Lady lived? Her space? And that is why Ethan comes here, to see his Granny?" She turned to face him and was surprised to find him directly behind her, and not at conversation distance. It startled her.

He put his hands on her waist to avoid her running into him. He shrugged, "I don't know." He leaned his forehead on hers.

She smiled and put her arms around his neck. He seemed so confident and pulled together, but was painfully shy in the area of romance. "Would you like to kiss me?" She tilted her lips toward his.

He didn't answer. He leaned down and kissed her, feeling her waist. He kissed her a long time before backing off. "You don't have any pantie lines under your dress."

She winked at him. "I had plans for you the moment you asked me to the fish fry. It's why I wore the long dress and not the sun dress."

He smiled and kissed her again, this time pulling her dress up as he picked her up running his hands over her bare rear end. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He sat on the humble wooden bed and lay back with her on top of him.

She kissed his neck, and then ran her lips along his earlobe.

"I want to make love to you right now," he blurted out. He stopped, "I can't believe I just said that. I am sorry." He started to lift off her of him.

"I know about the cheerleader, and crazy Lauren. All I can assure you of is that is not what I am going to do. Please don't leave." She reached down his shorts. He unbuttoned them and groaned, leaning hard into her while trying to wiggle out of them.

He cupped a breast, as he moved down her neck kissing her until he reached her cleavage. He untied the string of her maxi-dress. It had been too long since he had made love. He honestly thought he would die if she suddenly decided to refuse him. If she did, it would be par for course. He would never trust anyone enough to be intimate again, ever.

"Do you want to go downstairs?" she breathed into his ear.

He shook his head no. "If I don't have you right now, I'll surely spontaneously combust." He lifted her by the waist just enough to slide inside her.

When they were done Kathy lay with her head on his chest, because there wasn't room in the narrow bed for her to lie next to him. He kissed the top of her head, and smoothed her hair.

"Thank you," he said, stretching and knocking open the footlocker at the end of the bed. "Oops."

"No, thank you, for being so incredible." She smiled. His kisses were gentle, and his touch kind, but massaging. No one had ever made love to her like that before. She wanted to fall in love with him. She could understand Lauren's obsession with him. He was perfect.

"Can I stay the night, but not right here?" he asked, sounding awkward

and nervous.

She grinned, "I would be delighted. Come on. Let's go to bed, properly." She kissed him on the mouth and then got up. "Jason." She pointed into the bottom of the footlocker he just knocked open.

He pulled his shorts back on and rolled over and looked into the footlocker. There was a false bottom, and even in the waning light, the edge of a brown quilt could be seen. "No one has found this before now, with all the trespassers up here? There was no way this could have been kept secret."

Kathy pulled her dress back on. She leaned into the locker and pulled up the false bottom to reveal a beautiful brown quilt, or at least it once had been. Dry rot had taken its toll. "Help me set it down. Be careful, it's fragile." Threads were falling off of it.

Jason put both arms under the quilt and set it down on the bed. He used his phone light to look in the bottom of the locker.

Kathy leaned over his shoulder, and read the words burned into the bottom of the locker. She read the words, "Red = Death/Avoid, Purple = Safe, Brown = Storm's brewing, hold in kind. It's the quilt meanings. Why would she keep this here?"

"If she wrote this down, she was a really bad smuggler. That must have been how William and Percy cracked her code. He found this," He stood behind her, caressing her stomach, and kissing her neck.

"She was a decent human being, trying to do the right thing. Decent people don't make good smugglers," she said, reaching back to run her fingers through his hair.

Jason nodded. As interesting as he found this, the only thing he could think of was getting Kathy back out of her dress and into that fluffy, comfortable looking bed she had.

"Ethan...Stable Boy," Kathy whispered, holding her dress over her bare

breasts. "Did you see who killed the man? In the cane field?" she added, figuring that when Ethan was alive the subdivision had been sugar cane fields.

Silence.

"You didn't expect an answer, did you?" Jason asked, but he sounded very unsure of whether or not he had expected one too.

She slipped her dress back on to properly cover her. "No, but I didn't expect to find this either." She pointed at the quilt. "Besides, some of the best clues are always unexpected. You guard it. I'll go get a box to put it in so it will be safe. Check around, see if you can tell if anything has been disturbed."

He nodded. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind for the rest of the evening."

She leaned up and kissed him. "We're not done, at least I hope not. I just don't want this one vanishing when we glance away. I want it safe in my room, where I can see it." She ran off.

He sat down next to the quilt staring at it. It had once been exquisite work. His mother would love to see this. He used his phone to take a photo of it, the quilt code, and then uploaded them to his work email account. Then he noticed the writing in the photo.

The inscription didn't state the quilt meanings it stated. Hello, it's Stable Boy. I am sorry I cannot help you further. I get to go away now. Please help Granny. She will keep Mother safe, for my sake.

Jason looked at the photo, and then back down into the locker. The quilt code was still etched there. He looked back at the photo, it was the quilt code. He took another photo.

"Tell mother, I promise to be a good boy, but I won't remember this place."

He looked away, and back at the screen. It was another photo of the quilt code. He looked around. "Stable Boy?"

He snapped a photo again.

"Good-bye, Daddy. I will see you soon."

He had meant to stare at the screen for a long while to make sure it did not change, but involuntarily glanced at Dark Lady's bed where he had just had unprotected sex with Kathy. He looked back. The message was gone, replaced by a third photo of the quilt code.

"Found one," Kathy said, coming up the kitchen entrance. He must have been staring wide-eyed at her. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I...uh..um" His gaze dropped to her flat stomach.

"Oh for heaven's sake not you too. There are no ghosts. It is just the work of a psycho killer's mind games."

"Stable Boy said to tell mother he promised be a good boy." He glanced at Kathy's lower abdomen, again, and then at his phone. Too bad the messages were gone.

"Of course he is. I am sure he was a little angel baby." She gently put the quilt into the box, and carried it down stairs.

"I could use a drink, I think," Jason said, checking his phone again. "And you have no idea just how much of an angel baby he intends to be."

"I have some beer in the fridge, but I'll warn you, I am a light weight." She boxed and took the quilt downstairs.

"A beer would be great," he said, leaning on the kitchen island counter top.

After several beers each, they were both now drunk. They had moved to the living room with their beers. Kathy's furniture looked ridiculously small for this grand room. Perhaps she would move it upstairs to the mezzanine?

Kathy mused, "Do you think you knocked off her trunk-locker-thing lid by accident? Maybe, no one else could open it because her ghost self was sitting on it?" She leaned in close to Jason. He still smelled of his aftershave. "You smell fantastic."

He smiled. "I don't know. I think so," he was having a hard time not

slurring his speech, time to stop drinking. "Someone must have left it there, Louise mentioned for us to go to your library." His head was spinning, but he was enjoying the fact that Kathy's right breast brushed against his arm when she leaned into him. He felt like a teenager on a date with a pretty girl, and had to laugh at himself.

"Really, do you think she drove her scooter up there?" Kathy said laughing. Why was that funny? Oh, because she was totally lit. It had been a long time since she was this buzzed on a date.

"Damn it!" she said, frowning.

"What?"

"Do you think someone broke into my house and put that there? The killer?"

"Who?"

"I don't know, you're the active duty police officer."

"But you're the trained detective," he said, leaning in and kissing her neck. "Did you lock all the doors?" Sable Boy's message calling him 'daddy' was fading as he felt the urge to finish what he started with Kathy earlier.

"Yes," she breathed, "You have had too much. I can't let you drive." She ran her fingers through his hair.

"That's OK, you can ride along all night if you want." He couldn't believe he just said that! He had never physically wanted a woman as badly as he wanted Kathy right now.

He was about to hope she didn't get mad at him for coming onto her that strongly, but the thought was cut off by her putting her hands down his pants.

"Do you want to come to bed with me and talk about the evidence in the morning?" she asked, digging her nails into his rear end.

He nodded, "Thought you would never ask." The only thing he could focus on was making love to her as he carried her upstairs and sat down on

the bed. He pulled her maxi-dress off, and lay back pulling her with him.

Neither of them saw Dark Lady with Percy's book. She set it on the night stand, opened it to the page Stable boy had left the message on, and then she glided out of the room. She had intruded enough.

THE RANDY BELL INCIDENT

Kathy awoke with a slight headache, but felt safe snuggled into Jason's side. She pulled the covers over her shoulder, trying to ignore the single ray of sunshine coming in through the curtains, and somehow landing on her eye.

She stirred, remembering the sweet sensations of Jason's love making. He was very attentive. She was definitely falling in love with him, and prayed she wasn't making a mistake. She had been hurt so many times in the past, but Jason was unlike any of the men she had ever dated.

Did she dare allow herself to think she might still have her own family? How did Jason feel about that? She pushed the thoughts from her mind. *Don't fall in love yet, Kathy. There is still the Lauren factor.*

She could feel her comforter underneath her, but there was a blanket on her. She must have passed out, and Jason covered her. How freaking embarrassing!

She paused for a second.

What blanket was this? She only had the one. She opened her eyes, and then was immediately awake as she realized what it was.

"Jason!"

"What!" His dark eyes flew open, and pain shot through his skull as a

hangover headache took over.

"The quilt!"

They were covered up with the old brown quilt, and the Shakespeare reader was open on her nightstand. She picked it up. It had a message written on the pages. She read it out loud. "The Angry One, who hates everything, whipped the one in the cane field to death. The Angry One is after mother, and was not after the man. The next quilt is red." It was blocky childish lettering over several pages.

Jason leaned over her, caressed her face, and leaned in like he was going to kiss her. She could feel his heart pounding, probably because he was startled awake. He didn't kiss her, instead he leaned over far enough to whisper into her ear. "Do you take the pill?"

She stopped breathing. "No." She clung to him. "Oh God, Jason! Do you think he was referring to me as mother?"

Jason nodded. "He also called me daddy in the attic."

"Why didn't we think about that?"

"Cause we're older. Hell, at this point in my life a child would be the ultimate blessing, not an unplanned teen-curse. Especially if my son could have a mother as incredible as you are." He caressed her face.

Kathy smiled. "I wouldn't be upset either, but I must admit. I wasn't planning on having one nine months from now." She put her arms around his neck. "Is it OK to fall in love with you?"

He smiled and nodded. "Not until we get out from under this old, dry-rotted quilt."

She laughed. They got up and repackaged the quilt. She glanced over at the side table. "Um Jason." She pointed.

It was the little Shakespeare reader. It was lying open flat, with the message, *'If you want a purple quilt, do not leave the house, but first you must find the bearer of the red quilt. It's in the house.'* was scrawled across the pages in loopy cursive writing that was very different than the other message.

"Jason, we didn't leave this here last night. That means someone was in the house while we were sleeping." Kathy covered her mouth. "They could have blown our brains out. And, we would not have known it."

"I think it's time you tell me about Randy. Is it possible that he is trying to get revenge for your part in his termination?"

"By whipping an innocent man to death? I don't' think so. Do you think it could be?" The idea was very far away from what she believed Randy could do.

"By making your murder look like the same suspect did it, so no one would ever suspect him. It would be a good way to get away with it, wouldn't it?" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I need to eat, and get something to drink. I am so thirsty it is hard to think straight. Do you think someone came in last night? Perhaps you are alive right now because whoever came in didn't expect two people to be here."

"Could it be one of your psycho ex-girlfriends wanting me out of the way?"

"Ex-girlfriends?"

"Lauren, or the Cheerleader bitch."

"The Cheerleader bitch died in a drunk-driving crash almost ten years ago. Thankfully her drunk ass only killed herself. Lauren was never...ever...a girlfriend, nor was she ever even good enough to use as a heated blow-up doll. Not only that, but she is one hot financial mess."

Kathy was intrigued. "How so? Did she really work as an officer?"

He nodded. "I hired her to help her out money wise, because I thought she was a victim of the housing scandal. I fired her because she had been taking the school kids' fundraiser money, greedy bitch. She's lucky they let her return it, and didn't prosecute her. They said being fired was enough. Frankly, I am surprised the school was able to keep it quiet. She was trying to buy this house, but her credit is crap. As it turned out, she had let the bank foreclose on her home, because she thought she shouldn't have to take the loss on its value during the downturn. So. She couldn't get a

mortgage even if the market was good, which it isn't. This is a small town, and the same bank held Lauren's foreclosed mortgage, and the Caine Plantation. That meant they wouldn't deal with her under any circumstances. Frankly I was stunned when I learned they let her handle the closing papers."

She stared at him looking...scared. Why did she always have to fall in love with someone who loved her less? Why couldn't she find someone to love her back, as much as she did him? Perhaps it had been a bad idea to sleep with him so soon, but he was just so adorable to her.

He made a face. "You didn't think I was actually interested in that nasty, bony, scheming, blow-up-doll-want-to-be, do you? I never had sex with her. Creepy old piss ant."

"Gee, Jason, How do you feel about her?" Kathy smiled weakly. "No, I didn't think that, but she is clearly interested in you, and I am in the way of both objects of her desire. And you said Milton had an uncle at the bank, and you just confirmed it was the same one that held this house and Lauren's?" She pointed at Jason with one hand, and the house with the other, before stepping into him and running both hands down his backside.

"Yes, the same. Nice try. Tell me about Randy. The whole story...Please," he said, taking both of her hands and kissing them.

She reached over, picked up her phone, snapping a photo of the message. "Just to make sure it's really there this time." She checked to make sure it was in the photo, it was, but that didn't really mean much on this property.

"Come, let me make you breakfast, while you tell me about Randy," he said, slipping his polo and shorts back on.

She nodded, and ran a brush through her hair. She picked her flowery sun dress today. The dresses were new to her wardrobe. She had never worn them until moving here. She had bought every color that didn't clash with her hair, with matching flip flops, at least ten pair. No more black, gray, or navy blue suits, with dress shoes. Then she followed him downstairs

"Don't worry, we'll take care of the quilt later, but you are going to tell me about Randy. Now," he said, starting to sound impatient. "No more runaround."

She nodded. He was right. "We need to consider every angle, an angle left uncovered, is a corner for the suspect to hide in." She followed him into the kitchen.

He grabbed a bottled water and handed her one. He downed the entire bottle. "Lord have mercy, I am going to die of thirst!"

She down at the stool by the kitchen island and sighed, "Sometimes in Homicide we handle severe assaults. It isn't always death scenes. Sometimes with the bad assaults, we work them like a homicide...just in case. One day we received a call. I am not sure why Randy formed the opinions that he did that day. Anyway, the wife had beaten the holy hell out of the husband with a Louisville Slugger."

"That's a switch," he said impressed. He had never worked a domestic from the reverse angle.

"Just because men don't get their asses kicked as often as the women, doesn't mean they don't get beat at all. The husband kept saying he deserved to be beaten, that it was alright. Justice had been served."

"What did that mean? Are you going to get to the Randy part?"

"It needs to be in context," she nodded. "He was on parole for throwing scalding water on her, burning her back severely enough to require skin grafts."

"Jesus."

"He had gotten out...paroled after serving five years of a twenty year sentence. He had tried to 'make-it-right', as he put it. She even admitted he had been like Prince Charming to her. She also admitted that she couldn't come to terms with what he had done to her before. After all, every morning when she toweled off, she was reminded of how he really felt about her, as she looked at her scarred body in the mirror."

Kathy paused and watched him as he started mixing up some scratch pancakes, with bacon bits in it. She smiled.

"Continue," he said, noticing she was staring at him. "Please don't let me interrupt."

She sighed, "Randy locked him up for assault, which violated his parole. He would go back to prison for a long time," she raised her eyebrows, "a very long time."

"Why, if she assaulted him? Why would he even think to lock him up?" Jason looked confused.

"He said...He said...something really stupid, and really untrue about blacks. I really can't bring myself to repeat it, even if it is only a retelling of the situation," she said, unable to repeat the words out loud without bursting into tears. "It was all just so untrue! So surreal! Randy had never, ever said such ignorant and hateful things."

She had no clue he even harbored such thoughts, let alone the capacity to act on them. She had been devastated, because she had looked up to Randy. What sort of person did that make her, if she chose such a person to mentor her? She paused, and then continued, "He was offended that the man had been out on parole, but even the victim, now turned suspect, had admitted that he had turned into a role model citizen."

"It isn't his place to be offended. The function of the criminal justice system is to rehabilitate criminals. The job of the police is to gather evidence. The job of the parole board is to decide who can be let out of jail. It sounds like he lost sight of that fact. So why did you cover for him?"

"I didn't, I just made it so the case couldn't be prosecuted, everything had to be dropped, even the parole violation. I knew Randy for a long time. I know he hated his father, but he never spoke of the specific reasons. I don't know if that had to do with his actions? I don't know why he snapped like that? I needed more information before just burning his future."

"See, that is the mistake. It wasn't your place to falsify evidence to cover for a racist, while trying to protect the innocent. Did you mean to assist the real suspect in this case in getting away with domestic violence, having used

a weapon?"

She shook her head. "There was no way her husband would have ever testified against her. He was already formulating some sort of bar fight story, and he was sticking to it. She wasn't going to be prosecuted regardless. He sincerely believed justice had finally been served."

"You really owe your Captain for protecting you. Randy should have been allowed to go down for what he did, and you should have notified the chain of command immediately, and not wait to have been asked to tell the truth."

"Well that sounds familiar! Thanks, Chief!" Tears welled in Kathy's eyes. "I didn't want anyone to have trouble, not for the victim, not for Randy, not for the man's wife, not for me, not for the department, not for anyone. I just didn't want the injustice of someone wrongfully headed back to prison. You know what I did want? I didn't want to know that my longtime friend and mentor was like that on the inside. Something so bad was going on in Randy's life that he would rather everyone think he was racist than let any of us know what the real story was, because he had shut me out long before he was fired. I think his wife was beating him. I just wanted every..."

"Everyone to have everything," he said, smiling at her.

She offered a weak smile back. Normally she would have flipped with joy at the look in his eye, it was obvious he was falling in love with her too. Right now it was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears.

"I testified against Randy, immediately. I never lied. I answered questions as soon as the man's lawyer complained about it, and when the parole board started asking questions I answered them. I was the one who reported the situation to the Captain. He heard it from me first, and I think that is what saved me. Although, if I had remained silent, they would not have been able to prove anything against Randy. He would have gotten away with it. He said that like fifty times! He would scream at me *'Why didn't you just shut up?'*"

"You didn't because you are a decent person, who wants to do the right thing. And sending a rehabilitated non-criminal back to prison is not the right thing."

She sighed loudly, and glanced at her new, perfect tile floor.

He poured the pancake batter into the pan, "Coffee," he pointed to the coffee maker, "Please, don't let me interrupt the story."

"Randy was fired. He lost everything. His wife was so disgusted with him she left him. Honestly, I think they were both disgusted with each other long ago." She paused. "You know one thing I have learned as a homicide detective; anyone can be pushed to do anything, given the right set of circumstances. Do you think it could be Randy? Jesus have mercy! Randy had literally lost everything, and being a homicide detective, he could easily pin this on Milton's so-called *ghost* murderer! Especially with as superstitious as everyone in this town is. Oh God! Please don't let him have killed an innocent man in order to cover up what he hopes to be my murder!"

"You know, probably better than his wife, if he is capable of it? You after all, have spent more time with him than anyone, at any point in his life. Long term police partners know each other better than siblings."

She nodded, barely able to hold back the tears. She wasn't someone who cried easily. But once she started she turned into a blithering idiot. She did not want Jason to see her like that, even if he was being a questioning schmuck right now. "I wouldn't have thought he would really act on those stupid comments he made, so I am clearly not the best judge of what Randy would do."

"As soon as we eat, we are collecting that book and quilt as evidence. Do you have any reports Randy wrote? Perhaps we can compare the handwriting in the book. Meanwhile you are coming to stay with me until this is sorted. He won't look for you at my place."

"I can take care of myself. I was a SWAT sniper for three years."

"Fine, if someone needs shooting from a half a mile away, I will leave you to it." He took two steps toward her, and cradled her face, "I'm just going to put myself out there and hope for the best. I am crazy about you, and I would want to die if anything happened to you. Please don't stay alone here, with a stalker having such easy access to the house. There must be twenty glass doors here, with only 18th century thumb locks. Even

though they are new, they are still just thumb locks. And if you remember your physical science class correctly, glass breaks. And, you are surrounded by it."

She leaned up on her toes, and kissed him. The timer beeped. He backed off, and served the pancakes.

When they returned upstairs the book was gone. She checked her phone, there was just a photo of her side table, and there was no book.

"We're leaving. Now. I am not taking a chance that whoever is stalking you is still in the house." He leaned over to whisper in her ear, "I don't have my gun with me. Just walk out casually, in case it isn't the Dark Lady playing us again."

"You aren't actually believing that stuff? This is an elaborate set up. Randy's a history buff, and ghost stories fascinate him," She grabbed her Glock 40 automatic pistol, and extendible nightstick from under the mattress.

She handed him the Glock and nightstick, and then pulled her M-16 sniper rifle out of a locked trunk at the foot of her bed. She loaded and then press checked it. "Let's go,"

"What are you doing with an M-16?" he asked, with an excited hushed whisper. "You are definitely the most interesting woman I have ever met." She didn't look big enough to handle the weapon, but clearly looks were deceptive.

"Clearing my house; no one runs me off my own property, cover my six. I have all this SWAT training, may as well use it to my benefit." she said, shouldering the rifle at low ready for quick and accurate firing. She moved forward like a cat hunting a mouse. The Special Weapons and Tactics police training had been required for her short stint in Vice. She had been annoyed when she was sent, but was now glad she had it.

Jason fell in behind her. He was feeling very torn about wanting to watch her house clearing techniques, and just picking her up and running out of the house.

It took nearly an hour for her to be satisfied that the house was clear, and the suspect wasn't doubling back on them through one of the many passages, or doorways that seemed to connect and reconnect every room.

"Let's check outside for footprints," Jason suggested.

She nodded, and slung the rifle over her shoulder. She doubted there would be any useful footprints since the house painters had been in and out, and all around.

They walked around, it was dry and there were very few prints. Too bad it hadn't rained last night. That would have washed away the old prints and left fresh mud for new ones.

"Look here," Jason pointed out. "It's like the one by the uncavey, sinkhole."

Kathy put her foot next to a faint, but fresh footprint that appeared to match the ones by the cave, there was even the 'Rocky' logo in the center, with the same wear pattern.

Then a thought struck her, "Randy is about the same size as me, but a bit heavier. He is shorter than most of the other male officers I worked with. He had borrowed my dress uniform shoes once for a promotional interview. His foot is the same size as mine! And, fired or not, he would still have his uniform boots! Oh hell no! Someone I loved and looked up to like a brother is after me! And not just to kill me, but to horribly maim and torture me!" She took in a quivering breath. "To have actually done that to a poor innocent father! His poor family, it was closed casket. I am supposed to be closed casket!"

Jason reached forward and held her. She was shaking. "I am not going to let him take you away from me. Not when I have waited this long to find you." He kissed the top of her head. She clung to him crying and shaking for quite some time.

"Poor Milton, if I had never come here he would be alive. His little girl would still have her father. I am a curse!" She whined.

"That is not true. You cannot think that. You are smart, funny, caring,

and wouldn't hurt a mouse."

"Most people wouldn't say that about a sniper," she whined. "Maybe I deserve it!"

"No one deserves that."

When she regained her composure, he called Mike to bring a casting kit to make an impression of the print.

He eyed the rifle, she still has a great deal of her police stuff; and her whereabouts was unknown for the time frame of the Lawrence murder. She didn't arrive to be with the movers until they had taken at least two loads into the house. "Did you keep your Rocky Boots?"

Kathy stared at him working very hard to ignore the accusing look he was giving her. She would burst into tears again. "Did Lauren have police boots as part of her uniform, or just the dress shoes?"

He straightened up. "Boots, she was school patrol, that involves walking. The boots are designed for that. She also wanted this house! Kathy, do you still have the closing papers! What happens to the house if you die? Lauren is an attorney, what did she write into those papers? It has to be Randal, or Lauren; but why kill poor Milton? What's he got to do with this, there just wasn't a reason for it. My brain just cannot accept that Milton was just a meaningless decoy."

Kathy nodded and went to get the papers while he watched the foot print. She returned almost instantly they checked the closing papers and deed restrictions.

"That is what I thought," Jason said, pointing to a size two font clause that indicated that if Kathy died, the house reverted to the president of the local historical society for preservation.

Kathy huffed, "Let me guess, Lauren is the Prez. Is this even a legal clause?"

Jason shrugged, "That would be for a judge to decide." It was a relief to see her regaining her normal demeanor.

"That's a cop answer if I ever heard one," Kathy said grinning. "Now I'll have to get an attorney, file a suit, and have that overturned...I mean...stricken...removed. Whatever it is that is an aggravating waste of time."

Mike pulled up to the stable doors. "Hello," he called.

"Hello. Did you find one?" Jason asked.

"Yup." He brought the kit over and handed it to Jason.

As Jason mixed the kit for casting, he noticed Mike texting someone. "Stacey?" Her due date was about a month out. If history repeated itself for the fourth time this is the part where Mike loses his mind waiting on the baby. His brother wasn't a patient man.

"No, mom. You're wearing the same clothes from yesterday. Your hair is a hot mess, and the whole outside here smells like your bacon pancakes. Dude I can't believe you can eat those, and don't weigh a million pounds." Mike finished texting.

Jason finished pouring the cast, and then straightened up. "You're tattling on me for staying overnight with a girl?"

Mike nodded smiling. "Yupper! You stayed overnight...with a girl...in the Caine Plantation. That alone warrants some sort of announcement."

"Don't you have somewhere to patrol?" Jason put his hands on his hips. "I'll turn in the evidence myself, if it means you'll get out of my face with the *texting mom crap*. Besides, I am sure you would rather call her, and it would be easier from your patrol car." He pointed toward Mike's patrol car. "Over there."

"Yes sir." Mike put the phone to his ear as he walked back to his car.

Jason shook his head. "Sorry about that."

Kathy giggled, and then hugged him around the waist. "I am an only child, so sibling dynamics are fascinating to me."

He smiled. "Well, twenty minutes for this to dry." He sat down at her

little bistro table.

"Yup, like watching paint dry."

"Yup."

They waited for it to be completely dry, and then packaged the cast as evidence. Kathy pulled Jason back into the house. "Come with me." She led him back upstairs, put the guns away, and then dug out her old uniform boots from a wardrobe box she hadn't unpacked yet. It was still sealed with packing tape.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you an answer to a logical question that a judge would ask, and quashing that look on your face from earlier," she said, taking the footprint casting and holding it upside down next to her own boot. "Shoe wearing is almost as individual as finger prints. Even two people, wearing the same brand and style boot, with the same outside step would have different wearing elsewhere. Here, notice up by the ball of the foot on this one, it's also worn on the inside. Even though my boots have inside wearing, I have no uneven wearing anywhere else on the sole." She pointed to her boot's still pristine ball, and tried not to be irked at the look of relief on his face. "You know, my captain did tell you that he drove me to the airport...in New York."

He blushed deeply, and nodded, "Why are we seeing a judge?"

"To get a search warrant for Lauren's boots. We need to rule her in, or out. Someone is after me, and I need to find out who...and I need to know right now."

"Do you think that bony, skinny, psycho could physically do something like that?"

"We're about to find out. If it isn't her, then we can focus on Randy."

The Dark Lady had watched them drive toward the road. The new Mistress was so much like her beloved Mistress. The need to rescue ran

strong in both of them. She had risked everything to save an innocent, just like Marissa had, and since she left the house, she would risk it all again.

The two of them were sleeping so soundly this morning that they were completely unaware of the intruder. She had moved the curtains over a bit to alert them to the intruder. She hated to give up the hope of making them believe in ghosts, but to believe, they needed to be alive. She needed to do for this Lady of the House what she could not do for Marissa. The new lady could still be saved! This was Dark Lady's chance to finally free herself of this world and set Sable Boy on a steady path. She needed to let go of her hatred of the Caine's.

Dark Lady smiled at her beautiful wallpaper. What a gift from the new Lady! It was so peaceful to be in the foyer or up on the mezzanine now.

There was the creak of a footstep on the back porch. Dark Lady jerked her head toward the parlor. It was the Angry One. Someone was invading her home with a malice that was so deep it reminded her of Percy! She hated the Angry One. Thoughts of murder tainted the Angry One's every breath.

The Dark Lady smiled, a horrible bloody smile, and whisked to the parlor.

"May I help you?" she asked, allowing blood to flow freely from her eyes. The scars on her face reopened, exposing her cheek bones. And blood splattered her beautiful gown.

The Angry One held up a cross, and then began saying prayers.

It wouldn't work; the anger was more powerful than the prayers. Anger was the only thing this one could feel! Prayers required an inner surrender to God. Anger that crossed over into loathing and hatred was the direct opposite of Holy Surrender. That was a fact Dark Lady was well familiar with.

Dark Lady charged the Angry One, knowing that charging through a living soul would cause pain to the soul. The Angry One shivered, and fell passed out on the ground.

Dark Lady leaned within an inch of the Angry One's face, waiting for the Angry One to wake up. Her bleeding, bone-exposed face would be only inches away when the Angry One awakened.

She was worried about the new Lady. She should have stayed here! This would be over now, if she had stayed. If the Angry One was able to escape, harm may befall the new Lady.

A CONSPIRACY OF OPPORTUNITY

Two hours later, Jason and Kathy sat in Lauren's living room going over each one of her shoes.

Lauren had cussed at Jason when he knocked on her small, over-the-garage apartment door and handed her the warrant. She didn't qualify for a nicer apartment because of the foreclosure on her credit.

Lauren sat on her couch fuming as she read her copy of the warrant. "I told you I threw the boots away after *Sir Tease-A-Lot* fired me. I have no reminders of ever having been with the force, unless you want to include this kind and thoughtful warrant as scrapbook worthy!"

Kathy shook her head, this was becoming useless. "Let's just collect the most worn shoe and send it to the lab for wear comparison. I don't know what they can do if the shoe is different, but..." she trailed off shrugging. "We'll see. They can at least tell us the wear pattern."

All of Lauren's shoes had an inside wear pattern. The ball wearing was different, and there were scuff marks on the toe where she props her feet on her toes when she sits at her desk. Kathy seriously doubted the shoes would match on any level.

Jason nodded, and turned to Lauren. "Did you throw them away or donate them?" It was hard for him to stop himself from staring at Lauren's red quilt. He noticed Kathy snapping a photo of it, now that Lauren was facing away from her.

Lauren paused, "I donated them. They weren't that worn, and since they are nearly indestructible it seemed a shame to put them in the trash, although I seriously considered it. I threw them in the donation bin outside the secondhand shop."

"Did they give you a donation receipt?" he asked.

Lauren shook her head, "It was less than \$500, so I didn't even bother to ask."

Convenient! Both Jason and Kathy thought at the same time, but Kathy was suspecting Lauren less and less. If Lauren was involved, she was involved as an accomplice, and that was a stretch since there was no way she and Randy knew each other. The main physical evidence simply did not match her. However, it was hard to ignore the fact that Lauren would greatly benefit from Kathy's death and she seemed to have an uncanny knack for showing up at the most opportune moments.

"Those boots may still be at the store?" Jason said, but he sounded like he doubted that statement. Rocky Boots in decent condition would go fast at a second hand store, if they got passed the intake staff to the sales floor.

Kathy paused as something occurred to her. "If someone bought the boots and has been wearing them around, the wear patterns would be combined. It would almost make it impossible to use as evidence...credible evidence. It would certainly make it difficult to pass the *jury-sniff-test*."

Lauren couldn't stand it anymore, "Why are you doing this to me? Do you not think my law license was in enough peril without you trampling on it?"

"The evidence led us here, not only that, but you have an obvious, vested interest in Ms. Marconi's death," Jason explained, "And on more than one level. Additionally, your license is in peril because you caused it to be. How did you even get the bank to let you close the sale of the house?"

"Are we done? I need to call my attorney about you violating my rights. And if it means clearing me, I'll have him draw up a release. I don't want the house that bad! It was just a Hail Mary, since the other owners had such bad luck. And for your information, I am over you! You're a jerk! Get out!

And don't take my Anne Kline's for a sample." She screamed at Jason, and pointed repeatedly at the door.

Kathy nodded as Jason collected the sample shoes for comparison, and handed it to Kathy. She took them out to the car. She smiled, they were the Anne Kline's.

Jason paused as he started to leave, "Enjoy your rented-garage home. And never forget what sort of person steals from children, and how the people of this town would feel about it. You sue, I'll just defend it by telling them why you would want to hurt me. Have the release faxed to my office for Kathy. And as a bonus, you'll never address me or Kathy again, unless it is a dire police matter. You have twenty-four hours. Do I make myself clear you crazy bitch?"

"Bastard!" She threw one of her many shoes at him as the door shut.

Kathy and Jason returned to the police station to turn in the sample shoes from Lauren.

"Chief, you got a package from the state lab. Looks like some preliminary results from the Lawrence murder," Jason's desk Sergeant, Alan Saline, announced, pushing a small package toward him. He was an older man with a kind, grandfatherly look about him. "Oh, and the dark spot on the letter was some kind of poison. They said they are required to notify the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC emailed a packet for you to fill out. I printed it, and put it on your desk."

"Thanks, Alan," Jason said, taking the package, and then turning to Kathy. "This is retired Detective Marconi."

Alan smiled, "Ah, the kissy-rumor girl."

"What?" Jason asked, annoyed? And then he remembered, he had kissed her publicly at the fish fry. Not only that, but Mike probably called Alan as soon as he got off the phone with Mom this morning. Didn't these folks have better things to do than stalk his love life! They were worse than Paparazzi.

Kathy smiled and blushed.

Alan smiled and shrugged, "Folks are just happy to see you happy."

"Yeah, yeah, I need to call the CDC, and let them know this isn't a current murder. There is no need to send out an emergency HazMat truck, the stuff has been there for at least a hundred and sixty years, and it is contained, since they have the entire sample," Jason said heading into his office.

"Nice to meet you." Kathy smiled at Alan, and followed Jason.

"You too, Kathy."

Kathy smiled. "This is indeed a small town. You hadn't offered my first name. It was just like with Louise, she had already known who I was. I even had a nick-name. I am not sure whether or not to be disturbed by this. Everyone seems to have me at a disadvantage."

"They are just curious." Jason smiled as he looked at her, closing the door, and then setting the package on his desk.

"Kissy-rumor girl?" Kathy said smiling. "I wanted to be the sampler of the '*Cajun Buffet Girl*'."

Jason smiled, "That is very distracting from this package." He took out his utility knife and opened the package. He pulled out a letter and lab sheets. "The sharpening stone is new. The three arrowheads are period for the 1800's, but they have fresh sharpening marks on them. Which means we were right, the killer took the time to make sure to sharpen them up prior to killing Milton."

He turned the page, "The weather and wearing are consistent with long term exposure to outdoor elements, and only the sharpening marks are fresh. They could be the ones missing from the museum. I need to go talk to them and get a final list. They need to confirm, or deny, the whip was among the items taken. I wonder who donated that damned thing anyway. Who would hold onto a thing like that?" He handed the report on the arrowheads to Kathy, and then picked up the CDC printouts

"The whip was a replica. William supposedly buried the original one with Dark Lady." Kathy said moving to peek around his shoulder at the

report.

Jason nodded. "I still wonder who donated it. Someone would have had to have that thing made. The report says the leather from the whip is really old stuff. Maybe it isn't a period replica, just another nasty whip from the period that wasn't used on Dark Lady? Maybe it was the one used on William? The blood, of course, matches Lawrence. There are some corrupted areas though. Meaning it is possible there is someone else's blood on the arrow heads. I wonder if one of the Mathews' would be willing to give a sample for comparison, since we can't get one from Dark Lady. I know they claim this wasn't the same whip, but it would be nice to rule it out or in. Too bad there aren't any more Caine descendants to rule out William. I'll bet this is the one used on him."

He set the report down, "Where would someone even find that whip? Who would manufacture such an evil thing? Just the research and development phase of that thing would have to be a sin. Can you imagine sitting in on that meeting, or the sales pitch?"

Kathy nodded. The whole case was bizarre. She had never seen a case like this. "Perhaps we should compare the Lawrence case with others in the U.S.? Maybe it's time to consider a serial killer? Randy wouldn't even know where to find such a whip. He would have used his police baton, or a horse whip, something he could find easily, such as a gun; that he was trained to use. Burglary and research into ghost stories would take effort. He's a bit lazy."

"Let's head over to the museum, and see if Sandy has a full list of missing stuff. I am betting the whip is from there. I would also like to know where they got it, and go back to the source and ask them some questions." Jason set down the CDC paperwork. He glanced at the small stack of theft reports on his desk. He picked up the report and passed it to Kathy. "There was only a partial list of stolen items, that didn't include the whip, but as mentioned the whipping post was on the list. The museum staff would perform a full inventory, and provide an updated list, but I still have not received it. I know the whip was part of the display, but it was such a horrible mess that we couldn't pin point everything. It just wasn't possible." He checked his email. There was still nothing from the museum staff. Only the three photos of the quilt code were there. He glanced at Kathy's lower

abdomen afraid to consider anything he saw last night in that locker.

She smiled, "Let's go see if the list has been updated."

"Definitely; gimme five minutes." He passed her the lab report on Marissa Caine. "You were right, that poison was Cyanide. They want us to fill out the details of the death and send a copy of the autopsy report." He picked up the packet Alan had printed out.

"Let's call them. I have dealt with them before. They just want to make sure there is no chance for accidental exposure."

Jason called and explained what the case was, and that the lab had the only evidence. "They want to send a lab technician to rule out any accidental contamination of other items around the area."

"Yes," Kathy nodded, "Anytime."

"Monday Morning...Oh, she is staying with me until then, at least. No one will be around to be exposed. There is some landscaping going on outside, but no one should be inside. We can go and lock the library door though...Alright, see you then. Meanwhile, I'll fill out the forms and scan and email them back. You got it, Good-Bye."

He filled out the forms and sent them back.

"Museum?" she asked.

He smiled slyly at her, "First I have a Cajun Buffet for you," he said taking her by the waist and kissing her. She kissed him back and ran her fingernails down his back. "It's right this way."

He led her across the street to a food truck parked by the entrance to the downtown park. "This place has the best *Cajun-Approved* gumbo around, or if you prefer, they have an excellent blackened fish sandwich with fresh sliced potato chips. I love the chips, they season them with Cajun seasoning so they are a bit spicy."

"I think I'll try something new, the fish and chips." Kathy smiled.

He really liked the way she looked at him, like she really wanted him, for

him as a person.

After lunch they headed to the smallest museum Kathy had ever seen. Jason spoke with the curator, Sandy, who was just finishing gathering up the final list. It was broken into two parts, vandalized items, and stolen items. The whip was on the stolen list. There had been over \$720,000 in damage, and the loss of some irreplaceable and priceless artifacts could not have a value put on them.

While Sandy and Jason discussed the burglary, Kathy walked over to a quilt display, and stared at the old faded, yellowing, red quilt. "This is a beautiful quilt," Kathy said calmly, pointing at the quilt, but she noticed a patch piece with the same fabric as the one from the Lawrence scene, only this one was much older.

He stopped talking mid-sentence to Sandy, and walked over to stare at the red quilt. "Excuse me, Sandy, what happened to the purple quilt?"

"It's there..." Sandy walked over and stared at the red quilt like it had slapped her. "Where did this come from?" She sounded panicked. "Nancy!" she ran off to the offices. "Where's Dark Lady's quilt!"

While she checked, he turned his attention back to Kathy. "See that blank spot, right there next to the *new* whipping post?" he pointed to a conspicuously empty place.

Kathy nodded, "That is where the arrowhead whip was, wasn't it?"

He nodded, but Sandy was the one who spoke up, "Yes. We just had the glass on the side replaced. Even though this one was a replica, it was an important artifact in demonstrating the brutality of slavery, how far we have come, and how far there is to go in repairing racial relations." She handed an inventory list to Jason. "We have no record of having a red quilt. Our records, and photos display a purple one," she drew in a quivering breath. "So, we can add Dark Lady's beautiful purple quilt to the list."

Jason nodded and added the purple one to the list.

"Where did you get the replica of the whip?" Kathy asked, looking at the quilt patches, trying to find the white patch with the little rose buds.

"Lauren Grayson, she said it belonged to her great-great grandfather Gerald Blanc."

Jason was stunned. Everything about this case kept coming back around to Lauren!

Kathy's eyes widened. "Lauren is a Blanc? As in, from the notorious Blanc family?"

"Yes, one of many. The Blanc's if nothing else, were a very fertile family. Although, Lauren proved it with a blood test." She pointed to the empty spot where the whip was supposed to be. "Lauren said it was a horrible thing. She wanted it gone from her home. Replica or not, it was an important African American artifact. It was recently featured on one of those paranormal shows. They made a three thousand dollar donation to the museum's coffers for permission to use it in their show about Dark Lady and The Caine Plantation."

"Was the museum featured in the credits on the show?" Kathy asked.

"Of course. Our tour requests increased greatly after the show aired. It is the financial boost from that show last year that will carry us through this season, since we cannot open."

"Excuse us a moment," Kathy pulled Jason closer, "Randy watched those shows religiously! All of them! But, how would he know I bought the Caine Plantation?" She sighed, and rolled her eyes, "Facebook. I have been uploading photos of my renovation progress on the house on Facebook. I really need to go over my list of so-called friends," she said, frowning.

"I don't have a Facebook page." He shrugged. He certainly didn't want to reconnect with anyone from college.

She took out her phone, and called her old Captain. "Captain, hello, it's Kathy."

There was a pause. Jason watched her.

"I am doing good sir...Brian, yes, I am doing well, Brian. I am worried about Randy. How is he doing? Has anyone seen him recently?"

There was a long pause.

"Well, I am glad he was able to get the job with the transit authority." She gave him a helpless look.

After some more pleasantries they hung up.

Jason stepped over to her, while Sandy gave her list one more look as she walked around to make sure nothing else was missing from under her nose. He leaned into Kathy, "Any news?"

"Randy apparently is doing fine. Loves his new job with the transit authority in a neighboring city. Says he didn't realize how much he hated working in homicide until he didn't have to anymore. He also says he didn't realize how much he hated being married to Carrie until the bitch left."

"So he isn't stalking you if he is showing up for work every day, in another state that is more than a two day drive away. What the Hell is going on?" he whispered, so Sandy couldn't hear him. Maybe she was right, it was time to consider a serial killer.

She shrugged, and whispered back, "This isn't supernatural! Ridely the Whipper was not after me, because I now own the plantation!"

He made a face. "A lack of a suspect, is not a reason to consider a ghost. Please tell me not you too." Although, Stable Boy's message, *See you soon, Daddy*, was still ringing loud in his ears.

Sandy walked over, "I believe this is the whole list, Chief."

He nodded, "Do you have a school section? I would be interested in texts used by school children?" He glanced at the red quilt. The note from Stable Boy said red meant death, purple was safety, and brown was a brewing storm. He and Kathy had been covered up with that brown quilt, by someone, or something! *A storm was brewing, a red quilt was presented, and the safety of the purple one was gone.*

Sandy nodded, and led them over to another display. There was an old time lift-top school desk in the display with several school books stacked on the desk top. They were strapped together with a brown leather belt. The

Shakespeare Reader wasn't among them.

Sandy didn't notice the sigh of relief from both Kathy and Jason, as she explained the books and other educational items of the period. He thanked her for the updated list, and let her know that the whip and whipping post would not be returned anytime soon. But he would call the lab to let them know they were historical artifacts, and to be as careful with them as they could be while still getting justice for Milton Lawrence.

They drove back to Kathy's feeling very deflated. "We should go lock up the library, and grab a fresh bag for you to stay at my apartment? I could set up a Cajun Buffet that is personalized for you?"

"I would like that." She smiled, and nodded. "One thing I know is that I don't want to be alone tonight, and a Cajun Buffet sounds perfect. We should get some sort of protection though. As rewarding as a baby sounds, I seriously wasn't planning on one this fall," she said, leaning over and kissing his neck, giving his thigh a squeeze.

They went straight to the library and the reader was back in its place, all the books were. Kathy was sure she had left them out. She reached for it, but Jason blocked her.

"You know, we probably shouldn't touch this stuff if the CDC is coming to look at it."

"Oh, you're right."

The entrance to the room filled with a black fog. Dark Lady appeared behind them. She had to get their attention somehow! She flew through Jason several times, leaving Kathy alone. He shivered, but didn't appear to be able to see her, and gave no other reaction to her whatsoever. Neither of them could see ghosts. It annoyed her to no end. This would be so much easier if she could simply talk to them!

How did Stable Boy write! She used nearly all of her strength to pull one of the bulky legal books off the shelf. It landed on the floor with a thud. Both Kathy and Jason nearly jumped out of their skin.

They walked over to the book, lying open on the floor, with blood red

lettering imposed over the legal script.

"You almost had the Angry One in your rifle sights, twice. The next quilt is red. I have frightened the Angry One away for now. Please do not leave the house! Please take care of the baby.

Dark Lady"

Kathy closed the book and stared at Jason, who was still staring at the book.

"Dark Lady," she said using her best police detective voice. "I need you to erase this message, so it is gone when I open the book. Can you do that?" She wondered if she should let go of it, when the book turned cold, like it had been kept overnight in a freezer.

She offered an awkward grin and started shaking. *"I don't believe in this, I don't believe in this! There is no Angry One."* She opened the book, the message was gone replaced with.

"Believe in me or not, the Angry One is still after you! Grief and loss is causing the Angry One to be crazed."

"Hey! No mind reading! No! My thoughts are mine! That's not fair!" she said, babbling on, until Jason gently took the book from her, and set it down on the floor next to her.

"Let's go. Now." He lifted her up to a standing position.

She nodded, "I am taking my rifle."

"Fine, may as well grab the other weapons, and anything of great value." Just as well not to have an M-16 lying about in an empty house.

Dark Lady screamed knowing they would not hear her, *"Do not leave the house! You will be open out there! The purple quilt only exists here for you!"*

Kathy nodded to Jason, and then almost ran into her room, grabbing a bag, and dumping stuff blindly into it. "Someone is after me! They mean to whip me to death! And a ghost just saved my life! Jason! I am the target!" she said, finally admitting to herself that she was the intended victim. "Poor

Milton Lawrence was just a pawn in a grand scheme to get away with torturing me to death!" Tears flowed openly down her face.

They loaded everything she needed for a few days into the Jeep and went to Jason's apartment.

THE DARK LADY'S WARNING

Kathy awoke the next morning feeling safe in Jason's arms. There were no dry rotted quilts or haunted legal books. There was just Jason's clean, small, upstairs apartment over the downtown hardware store. She nestled in closer to him, and he held her close under the covers.

"You're still shaking," he said, concerned.

"Thank you for the Cajun Buffet." She offered a weak smile.

"You know, I think I will call you Dodger. No one can dodge a conversation like you."

She offered a genuine smile this time, before kissing him, and then getting up.

"Where are you headed?"

She picked up her bag, pulled out Lauren's historical book, and the folder Jason had given her. "To sit, and do more research. I need to re-read this with a different frame of mind. Her book is disgustingly racist. It glorified the Caine's as a whole, with almost no mention of the African Americans who also risked everything, and beyond, to be part of what was only Marissa's operation to freedom. The other Caine's certainly were not involved with helping anyone but themselves. Lauren only put the negative on that she had to, I am going to see if I can sort it out. It might help shed some light on her frame of mind," she said, pulling on her robe and heading

for the living room.

She also wrote a note to revisit her three unsolved cases later since The Dark Lady said the Angry One was *crazed with grief*. She doubted it could be one of them. One didn't have family. One had the entire family on the suspect list. And the other was a drug dealer whose mother seemed relieved. Apparently, she didn't have to deal with it anymore. Still they were the only leads she had at the moment.

He smiled as he bounced out of bed. He showered, and then joined her on the couch. She already had two pages of notes.

"I need to know more about William Caine. I wish I could see the copies of his journal," she said, opening the folder and flipping through the papers for his death report and a couple of newspaper articles. She pulled it out.

"Not much there," he said, flipping through the copies of the Microfiche files that Kathy had made. "This one might give you a general puff version of what he was like." He handed her an 1829 article from the paper. "It's about what a pillar of the community William Caine was. How he organized homes for *sinful women*." He snorted, "Yes, because men aren't the other half of that sin. Supply and demand is as true for retail stores as it is whore houses."

"Could be that he was trafficking them into sex slavery?"

"Wasn't that dear Percy? There isn't much information out there on him either. He must have been the behind the scenes person."

"Yes, but according to Marissa he learned how to be a monster from William. I would like to know who he was working with. Trafficking is a crime that involves a group of people. One dude can't traffic anything large scale out of the country, not even in the 1800's, especially humans. There had to be a team. *Pirates?*"

He gently took the file from her. "I think, I would like to make love to you again, before we eat, and then enjoy the day, thinking about something else. Tomorrow we can start fresh."

She smiled, nodded, and untied her robe. "Sounds like a much better use of time."

On Monday morning, Kathy was alone in her own bedroom at the plantation sketching the layout she wanted for it. She set her sketch pad aside, and thought about how she wanted to convert the little sitting room at the rear into a proper master bathroom, but she also wanted to make sure the newfound staircase was preserved. She wondered if everything would fit in there, and the fact that there were two of the glass door-windows in there meant privacy also needed to be considered. It felt good to think about something as mundane as how to finish her bathroom.

The CDC doctor, Dr. Charles Newsome, had been at the plantation all morning. He was wearing an obnoxious protective suit. It really seemed to be overkill, but he said ultimately they had no idea how much was there.

There was no sign of Dark Lady.

She couldn't wait to have guests stay in the finished house, and she could not wait to not think about murderers, ever again.

Jason was at work, apparently there had been some sort of argument between neighbors over a dog running in the road and getting hit. He went to assist Mike, because Alan was working a traffic accident that happened in front of the police station.

"Ms. Marconi," Dr. Newsome called.

"I'm in here," she said, coming out of her bedroom.

He was removing his gear. "There is no more threat. I'm taking the book, and having it destroyed, along with the books on either side of it. But, that is just being over cautious, especially with as old as it is. The main danger is ingesting it, although it can be absorbed through the skin. Neither of you touched it, correct? No, I suppose I would know if you had. That was some super concentrated stuff, hence the reason we wanted to collect it with full protections."

Kathy nodded no, "As long as it's gone."

Dr. Newsome nodded, "She really wanted to kill herself. Again, I am a bit surprised at the concentration, and there was a lot of it. You say, someone was falsely accused of murder more than 160 years ago? Talk about a cold case."

"More like frozen." Kathy nodded grimly. "The Caine's were trying to cover up an illegal slave trafficking operation, and not necessarily the one connected to the Underground Railroad. We're going to organize everything before we make a press release."

"Well, at least justice can be known if not served," Dr. Newsome smiled. "I look forward to reading the briefs on that."

She nodded.

"Did you know there are compartments under each of the bookcases? Do you have the key? I would like to make sure there aren't any poisons there. Maybe that is where the suspect hid it?"

"Really!" Kathy said. She sifted for her keys. "I didn't know that." She pulled out the skeleton key.

Dr. Newsome led her back into the library, and bent down by the first shelf. "Here, let me, just in case they stored the poison in there." He cleared the dusty legal books off the shelf, and held out his hand for the key. Kathy handed it to him. He took it and fumbled with the lock for a moment.

Kathy bent down to see the lock. It had been painted over, probably a hundred times. The doctor messed with it for a minute, picking out the paint with a scalpel. He put the key in, and finally it clicked.

He slowly opened the shelf about a quarter of an inch, and stuck some sort of meter inside. "Clear. It's just air." He opened the compartment to reveal gold coins, and bars that were stacked five inches deep and twenty-four inches long.

"Well, looks like you just hit the Lotto," The doctor said, swabbing a gold bar. "No reaction. I think it was just the book. Looks like the old

Mistress of the House just wanted to kill herself, and no one else."

There were twelve bookcases surrounding the library, each one had a lock.

Kathy pulled out her phone, and called Jason, "How is the call going? Good...If you're free, there has been a development at the plantation. Dr. Newsome from the CDC is still here. I think the Doc is going to help me clear the new space..."

The doctor nodded. "I have some time."

"When are you getting off? I can't leave the library like this. There are some items that need attention, and I don't know how long Doc can stay.....OK, love you," she hung up, and paused. She had said that last statement without thinking. Friends with benefits was one thing, lovers was quite another. She stifled herself, had she overstepped her boundaries? She hoped not, but the fact remained, he still had not introduced her to his parents.

The doctor smiled, "That much gold would make me nervous too. Let's see what is in the next one."

More gold, all of them were neatly packed with gold bars and coins, except the last one, it was half full of gold, papers and journals occupied the other half. Dr. Newsome went over the papers very carefully with his instruments.

"Kathy!" Jason sounded happy as he bounced up the stairs. He nodded to the doctor, "Hello, Doc,"

"Hello, Chief Rose I assume? I am Dr. Newsome, but you can call me Charlie." He smiled and nodded back.

"Yes, and it's Jason," Jason wrapped his arms around Kathy's waist, and whispered in her ear, "I love you too, very much."

She smiled and relaxed into his embrace.

"It's all clear. I am, however, going to take these samples and perform some deeper tests. Just in..." his mouth flew open, and he pointed behind

them. "Who is that?"

They both turned to look, but nothing was there.

"Are you alright Miss!" The doctor said, running over to the corner. He reached his hand out, and then pulled it back as if what he touched was painful. He screamed and backed up into Jason.

"What!" Jason asked, reaching for Charlie's arm to stabilize him. "What do you see!"

"Skinny, little, African American lady, with a slave collar, her face is bleeding! Horrible wounds! She says to tell you, for the baby's sake, do not leave the house again! The Angry One is after you. It's a woman." The doctor wrestled away from Jason, grabbed the bulk of his equipment and ran out of the house, leaving what equipment was not in his arms.

"Dr. Newsome! Charlie! Don't go!" Kathy started to follow him.

"Baby's! Sake!" Jason said, whipping around to face Kathy. "That is the second time a baby has been mentioned."

She stared at him. "How did he know about the Angry One? Dark Lady!" Kathy yelled. The room was spinning. "What baby!" Was she pregnant? She could only be a few days a long at the most. Kathy bent over as a wave of nausea overcame her. She ran to the bathroom, and vomited. *I can't be pregnant! Not now!*

She could feel Jason pull her hair back out of her face.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She shook her head, no, and then brushed her teeth. "I can't think about it right now. It's too much to take in. I found Percy's ledger and what looks like a diary. We also need to secure the gold. Do you have the CDC number handy? We need Dr. Newsome to come back!"

"Gold? I can text Alan and have him get Dr. Newsome's number." He pulled out his phone. Part of him was afraid to hope that Kathy was pregnant. He was beginning to think he would never have a family. Surprise or not, a baby was something he very much wanted, especially with

someone like Kathy.

She washed her face and stood up, looking in the mirror as she put her hands over her lower abdomen. "Do you think she means a baby for us?"

He held her from behind sliding his hands under hers. "I don't know, but if it is a baby for us, I want you both." He kissed her neck.

Kathy leaned back into Jason. She could feel his bullet resistant vest. It felt cold and hard, but it comforted her that he wore it. She needed to get out of here. "Let's just collect everything and get out of here."

Jason helped her remove the gold. They also found a note from Percy to his eldest son, Andrew, to use gold, because they didn't know how the war was going to play out and they needed to have money tucked away. If they had too much confederate money and the South lost, they would be penniless. Andrew had converted everything to gold, hid it, and then sealed over the locks so they would look like the trim in the bookcases.

Kathy smirked, "They didn't tell anyone, leaving their own children and grandchildren destitute, then they were both killed in such close succession. No one knew all that blood money was just sitting here, doing nothing. The whole time." she smiled as an idea came to her. "And the only way left to get justice."

Jason loaded the bags into the trunk of the patrol car. "We still have an hour before the bank closes. James at the bank won't be happy, but we cannot keep this out in the open overnight."

Kathy smiled nervously, and nodded. She walked around the patrol car and got in the passenger seat. She was a bit disturbed by what had just happened over the last several hours. She forced thoughts of a baby from her mind. She did not want to be pregnant, at all.

They drove in silence to the bank.

Jason was right. At first James, a short heavysset balding man, was not happy about being late, but was happy about the large deposit. He had

happily called his wife to announce he would be late.

Four hours later, Jason was getting antsy. He wanted to be alone with Kathy. Would a pregnancy test work this early? The more he thought about it the more he hoped the baby reference was about his and Kathy's baby. What if she wasn't pregnant? What if it was another baby! He would be so disappointed. Then a thought struck him, was someone else's baby in danger! Maybe they should have stayed at the plantation? The last thing he wanted was to work a baby death.

James sighed, "Sorry that took so long, I had to weigh and verify some docum..."

Jason huffed. He was feeling very much like he needed to get out of here, even if it meant scratching through the wall.

James smiled, "Well Ms. Marconi, you have forty-seven million dollars' worth of gold there. I have set up an account for you, several actually. I would like you to come back in the morning to discuss the foundation you were talking about. You might also consider some investment funds. By the way, it is your money. The house and its contents passed legally into your hands during the closing. You have..."

"To do what is right with this money, or I will go insane. It must be put into a foundation to help people. If you like we can setup investment funds to provide an income for the foundation. Otherwise, that is Percy's blood money, and I won't have it, except to carry out Marissa Henning-Caine's wishes to help people who have been victimized beyond comprehension."

"I understand. I can also help you get the foundation set up, so you are in control of how the money is spent, but you will need to select a board. The investment funds will keep it funded for a very long time. I can help you get a grant schedule going too, so the money going out matches the money coming in."

Jason noticed Kathy glance at him, and then turn her attention back to James. Everything was happening so fast with her. Right now, it bothered him that that fact didn't scare him half to death. On the contrary, he felt like he was at home whenever he was with her.

"I want a secured domestic violence shelter, for starters," her voice pleading, not demanding, "someplace for them to be safe when they have no place to hide..." Kathy said, taking a breath. "I have worked with so many people who are literally trapped in their own home. In fact someone I once cared deeply for was trapped. His life would have been so much different if his mother could have escaped with him, but she was also trapped. It seems that was her legacy to him, entrapment."

Jason hugged her from behind. "You don't have to decide right now. Right now, I would like to just get something to eat. You're looking pale." He hated it that he loved her, without even knowing her. It was scary.

Kathy nodded, thanked James, and tucked the paperwork with her newfound millions listed on it into her bag.

She followed him to the car, but he pulled her passed it. "Come on, today is Steak Monday," he said, leading her into the diner. If she was pregnant, she needed some iron. Besides, with the paleness of her skin he figured she was low on iron regardless of her condition.

They ordered the steaks. While they waited, Kathy pulled Percy Caine's ledger out and laid it on the table. "It has columns. They are titled requests and availabilities," she said, reaching for her soda.

"Availabilities?" Jason said. He picked up Kathy's soda and traded if for the water. He couldn't stand to watch anyone consume that poison known as soda pop.

She looked at him, "She didn't say our baby, she said for the sake of the baby." She reached for the soda.

"Just in case," he said, shrugging. "Besides it's late, caffeine could make it hard to sleep." He grinned.

"You are hoping for a baby?" The expression on her face was unreadable.

"No, yes, I am just saying, if you are pregnant, I really do want you both. I had given up hope of someday being a father. But if not, I still want you, and cola isn't good for anyone, especially at this hour."

She smiled. "Well, it will be a while before we can find out. Let's concentrate on Percy's requests and availabilities."

Jason nodded, and smiled at the fact that she did not switch her water back for the soda.

Kathy pointed to two columns, "It says inventory on hand for this side. There is a general physical description of the slaves he has to...trade...for lack of a better term."

Jason pointed, "What's HT, CU, and JM mean?"

"Probably requests from Haitian, Cuban, or Jamaican plantations for labor?" Kathy shrugged, it seemed logical since there was a subcategory for requested laborers. "FH, is probably field hands, the sub-code C is probably for cotton...S.C. sugar cane, etc."

Kathy flipped through a few more pages, "Oh here is one for the '*whores*' he trafficked. She flipped a few more pages.

"Hey!" she turned the book to toward Jason, "It's a whole section he devoted to keeping notes on Mary. Isn't that the Dark Lady's name? It says book 2 here. He really kept her documented."

He nodded, but his thoughts were in another world. He wondered if she would marry him, regardless of any future with a baby. He didn't want her to be kissy-rumor girl, he wouldn't mind at all if the townies called her Mrs. Rose.

She pulled the book back. It wasn't a ledger, it was a hidden diary within the ledger. "I guess she was his unknown, unwilling operative."

She flipped through a few pages and found one with a title, '*Momma's Death*'. She read it out loud, "June 12, 1846, Momma committed suicide. She drank the poison from the voodoo woman, and has not awakened. She looks blue, and smells of almonds. She left a note on her nightstand, but I hid it in the library. If she wants to call me a demon-spawned monster, may as well act as one! The old self-righteous, fen-sucked, hag was always nagging about how to treat people. This is also a fortunate opportunity to get rid of that uppity slave wench. Mary prepares Mother's meals, so I can

talk father into thinking Mary poisoned her. He won't believe she did it on purpose. I'll have to make him think it was accidental. I should be able to convince everyone that she did it on purpose."

"Here is one from a week later," Kathy read on, "I spoke with father regarding Mary. I had no trouble making him believe she did it. He almost thought it was on purpose. Apparently the two had argued over mother backing out of some sort of agreement...Argue...with a slave! Mother was too kind hearted. I would have beaten her bloody if she spouted that forked tongue at me! Father is seeking advice from Blanc on the handling of the matter. Of course, Mary is set to be put down, but how to put her down? Father is furious, so he wants to drag it out. Personally, I would like to just take her into the bayou, shoot her, and then leave her for those hellish reptiles to eat just like Ridely. Be done with it, but father wants revenge, and will drag it out. Right now she staying in the barn at night, chained to the whipping post in a position that requires her to stand all night. She is starting to look, and smell, rather ragged."

Jason made a face, "So, Ridely the Whipper..."

"Ridely, the Whipper part was Blanc's doing. I am sure Ridely doesn't want to be remembered for that."

He grinned, "Ridely didn't get stuck in the mud. Percy took him out there and shot him, and left him for the gators. I'll bet as a favor to Blanc."

Kathy continued, "Here is one from a few weeks later: Father whipped the slave hag, Mary to death with that incredible whip of Blanc's. I had no idea he actually loved mother. I am happy to be rid of both of the old hags. Father married too far below his station with her. I cannot believe she is my mother. And, I will always relish the sound Mary made when Father thanked her for helping us to secure the slave trade to the islands! Stupid, frog of a woman had no idea that we were taking them off her so-called Railroad. Father seemed all too happy to simply beat her until he collapsed. Of course the last few lashes had been to a corpse, but who could tell, she only screamed the first time. After I killed Stable Boy in front of her, she went silent. Her face was slashed horribly. It looked like she was crying blood. Too bad about losing the stable help, but he was young, maybe I can get him replaced at the auction block next week?" She paused, "What a set

of vicious bastards. No wonder Marissa wrote her suicide note condemning them." She picked up her water and took a drink.

Jason nodded, and offered a cocky grin. "I guess Lauren missed some facts in her book?"

Kathy almost snorted her water. "You think?"

She flipped a few more pages. "Father is being unreasonable with the money! He also says we have been moving too much inventory, and we need to slow down. My third child is starting school. He needs books. Father became angry, and said I should not have invested in the race horses. I hate to raid the whore house for island sales, but if I must, I must. There is a good crew working in there right now. I hate to bust them up, but I have to pick three to send to Jamaica. I'll send that one that thinks she is pregnant with my baby. That will shut the little harpie up. She isn't showing yet, so I can still fetch top dollar for her, and the Jamaicans will be none the wiser for at least two more months."

Jason snorted, "He really did kidnap and sell them further into slavery to...feed a gambling habit! I hope he is burning in Hell right now. Not only that, but one of them was his own unborn child." The thought was incomprehensible. He wanted a family so bad that he was almost like a second dad to his niece and nephews instead of an uncle.

"Jason," Kathy said, looking in his eyes, and dipping them.

He looked at her.

"Do you suppose Dark Lady is talking about Percy's baby?" she asked, looking back up at him.

He looked at her chest. "No."

"Did you just look down my shirt?"

He laughed a bit. "No, I looked at the veins in your chest. My sister-in-law always gets those big blue veins in her chest when she's pregnant. It is always the first thing that pops up." He traced the large blue veins on her chest.

She looked down at her chest. The veins did look more prominent. "I am going to ignore them for now."

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. "We should get a test on the way home."

"It's too early. Look, here is a confession by Percy that he murdered his father. It is dated almost twelve years later."

"Dodger." He wondered why she wouldn't talk to him about the possibility of a baby. Maybe she didn't want one? That was a disappointing thought! What if she didn't want him...no, she said love you first. He calmed his thoughts, he was being hysterical.

"Father has to go. He was worried the Marshals were gathering evidence to prosecute us. He recommended we just process the cane this year, and leave the other shipping business alone. The Marshals will get bored and refocus somewhere else. The money is too tight! So I am having Andrew convert some of it to gold and hid it from father, so he will see the need to keep our real trade open."

"Here is one for a month later," she said, "I staged father's death to make it look like Mary's ghost did it. The slaves bought it. I think it worked too well. They have barricaded themselves in their cabins and refuse to come out, even under the threat of the whip. The hard part was keeping Father's screams from being heard. He screamed like one of Blanc's little girls. Besides there is a war brewing, and gold will spend the same no matter who wins."

Jason twisted his straw in his water. "A year later, Percy died after being trampled by a Grey horse in the stable. Andrew and the middle son were about killed ten minutes into their service during the Civil War. No one else knew about the gold, so it went untouched. They lived hand-to-mouth with millions buried in their house."

The steaks came out, and they set aside the documents and ate, keeping the conversation contained to Kathy's landscaping. It was coming along very well. The house was looking really good; from the outside.

"Do you think it is safe for the landscapers to be there? Maybe I

shouldn't have them come back until this suspect has been arrested?" Kathy asked.

"No, none of the other workers have been bothered, except for Phil's men, but they were inside the house. I'll have Mike and Regina make some extra passes to keep an eye on them."

"Thank you, I don't want anyone...else...hurt...because of me." She put her fork down.

"No one was hurt because of you in the first place. They were hurt by a lunatic acting of her own accord. You have no idea who it could be? Lee Wilson? Not from college, high school, a vice case, girlfriend of a rejected boyfriend who didn't want to lose you?" He wished she would stop taking responsibility for other people's bad decisions.

Kathy shook her head no, and then paused as something came to her. She pulled out her phone and looked at the photo of the library check-out cards. "Lee Wilson. Randy's wife left him. Carrie Lee Wilson-Bell. It could be Randy's wife."

"Randy's wife? Why would she come after you?"

Kathy shrugged. "Another interesting tidbit; she has my old uniform boots. She asked for them to work in the garden. That is why it has an inside step wear mark like mine on the soul, the pattern is overlapped, with the wearing on the ball. It couldn't be her, could it? Why would she come after Milton? She was born and raised on the Lower East Side. She doesn't know anyone south of New Jersey, let alone the real South. And, she wouldn't quilt if her life depended on it."

"Let's put out a bulletin, just in case. We only need to question her. We can release her if she isn't involved. Regardless, if she is within 500 miles of here, I want to know about it." He was having a hard time believing that a lone woman could do such a horrific thing as what happened to Milton. "That would have taken strength. She would have to beat Mil down first, because he surely didn't lie there and demand a whipping. She must be one burly-man of a bitch, to beat him down, whip him like that, tie him up, drag the post back to the scene, and then tie him up on it. It almost seems like a two person job."

"Burly-man of a bitch. I am having a bad influence on you." Kathy grinned and nodded. "Carrie's a Pratt. I never would have thought her capable of murder, but yes, she is rather stout."

On the way home it was all Kathy could do to stop him from getting a pregnancy test.

"It's too early."

Reluctantly he had agreed, but refused to change the subject. He wasn't going to let her dodge him again. "So...if there is a baby...and it is ours...would you like a boy or a girl?" He needed to know she wanted him, and the baby.

She smiled. "You are like a pit-bull with this."

He smile a large toothy grin. "Hey, the woman I love, said 'love you' first, and there is a possibility of a baby. Which are two things I desperately wanted, but had totally given up on. So yes, I am going to hang onto it, Dodger."

She smiled. "In that case, I would like a healthy baby. Now let's go inside and check out the rest of this Percy Caine stuff. Maybe, I could write a book, an actual historical one, on the Caine Plantation? We could make some extra money for my new foundation with it."

He led her upstairs, "You have firsthand sources there. Lauren would be insanely jealous."

"She already is. The crazy part is that I understand why she would be so desperate to have someone as incredible as you are."

He kissed her at the top of the stairs. "Love you too, Dodger." He melted when she looked at him like that. He was also thankful she wasn't another loon. If it weren't for the fact that a psycho killer was after her, his life would be perfect right now.

Kathy followed him inside and set the diaries and ledgers on the coffee table. "So, Dark Lady says an *Angry One* is after me? But how could it be Carrie," she wondered.

"Lauren still isn't off my list of suspects. Everything, except those boots have tied back to her." Jason frowned. There was something, other than Lauren's usual crazy antics going on. She had to be involved in this somehow. After all, she was crazy, not stupid. He had learned the difference between the two words long ago, the hard way.

"But the boots clear her from being at the crime scene. Could she hire someone?"

"She stole money from children, blew eight grand on that so-called historical guidebook, and lost her house...on purpose. She has no money or credit to hire anyone. What old cases do you have? Is there anyone getting out of prison who would have a grudge on you?"

"I don't think so, I'll go through some of my old files in the morning, but I am still young enough that most of the people I locked up for homicide are still in jail, and will be for quite some time. Meanwhile, I was thinking you might like some dessert, Kathy-style." She wrapped her arms around her neck, and ran the tip of her nose along his earlobe.

"Sounds delicious, *Dodger*." He smiled and picked her up, enjoying the fact that she wrapped her legs around his waist. This time he didn't mind that she changed the subject.

FOR YOU ON YOUR SPECIAL DAY

Two weeks later they both stood in Jason's bathroom as the pregnancy test indicated a positive result.

"We're pregnant," Jason said, hugging her from behind, and placing his hands over her lower abdomen. "I always imagined being terrified of pregnancy, especially an unplanned one, but I can't wait to meet our child." He kissed her neck.

She smiled, "I had given up on the idea of ever being a mother." His embrace felt so warm and safe that she could stand here forever as long he held her.

"My parents are back. I should take you to meet them."

Kathy nodded, "Ya think?" she said, wiggling around to kiss him.

"First we have to stop by a jewelry store."

"Jewelry store?" She didn't need any jewelry. She had her little platinum cross and diamond stud earrings her dad bought her for high school graduation, and that was perfect.

Yes, I need to get you a proper engagement ring, so I can properly ask you to marry me."

"Marry you?" She hadn't considered getting married, to anyone, ever. She had watched too many friends lose everything during a divorce. A baby didn't scare her anymore, but marriage was terrifying.

He stopped walking, and faced her, cradling her face in his hands. "Please don't say no. I have waited 39 years for you, and our child. I have wanted to be a father ever since I held my eldest nephew when he was born. I want you, I want our baby, please marry me, and be my family."

She smiled, he was perfect for her, and it would drive her father nuts if she married someone without checking with him first, so it was a win-win for both her and the baby. "Jason Rose. Your soul fits perfectly up against mine. I love you, and could not imagine being married to anyone, but you. Now where's my ring? Did you have a date in mind?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Tomorrow? What about guests?" She didn't think many people from New York would come, but the few who would make the trip would be hurt if they weren't invited.

"Yes tomorrow, then we can have the reception at next month's fish fry. Everyone will want to come anyway. The only thing we will have to manage is enough cake for anyone and everyone. This way no one will feel snubbed from the reception."

"Sounds perfect. Do you think your parents will want to come tomorrow?"

He nodded, yes, and smiled. "What about your parents? Maybe Friday would be better? Can they get a flight?"

She wasn't sure if hers would want to come. "I'll call my mother. If she really wants to come, we can delay it until the flight arrives. Otherwise, I will see you at the courthouse tomorrow mid-morning? Does the Judge take a recess for mid-morning?"

He nodded, and led her down the stairs and over to the jewelry store. They chose a ring and while Jason paid, she called her mother, who overacted in the wrong way. Kathy hung up on her, and waited for Jason, trying not to burst into tears. Why was everything she did a disappointment to her parents? For crying out loud, she is in her late thirties, it was time to have a baby or hang it up. It wasn't she was sixteen. Why did they constantly complain about her future, never taking into consideration that

perhaps the future she saw for herself wasn't the same as what they saw for her. And more importantly! It didn't make her a knocked up hillbilly. She was feeling like she wanted to fly to New York and cuss them out...face to face.

Jason walked up with the box in one hand and the ring in the other. "Your finger, Madam."

She smiled, tempted to hold up the wrong finger, but instead, presented her left ring finger. She forced the thoughts of her pompous parents out of her mind. They weren't even here, than meant they could only ruin her day if she allowed it.

He slid the ring on. "Will you marry me?"

She flung her arms around his neck. "Yes!" If felt so good to have someone love her and want her, warts and all, without judging her or trying to force her into a future she didn't want.

"Congratulations," The jewelry store owner said, clapping.

They went directly to his parents to tell them the news, but it was too late. Before they even got out of the jeep his parents were on the porch. His mother, Janet, was tall with dark eyes like Jason's, and had salt and pepper shoulder length hair pulled back into a ponytail. His father, Perry, looked like an older version of Jason, except for the blue eyes. He also had salt and pepper hair that was close cut like Jason's. Both of them stood, with arms folded, on the front porch of their 1970's quad-level house.

"I believe we are missing a bit of information?" his mother said, in a scolding tone. She patted her lower abdomen.

Kathy leaned into Jason's shoulder, "Are they psychic?"

"No, someone must have overheard us at some point, probably at the diner. This is the super annoying part about living in a small town. Everyone knows your business before you do," he said, before turning his attention back to his parents. "No Mother, we only found out this morning. So in reality whatever you heard was just lucky gossip." He didn't get a chance to finish his entire thought before his dad interrupted.

"Well, you are marrying her! Aren't you? You can't just walk away and leave your child."

"Dad! I am not sixteen. We're getting married..."

"When!" Janet demanded.

"Tomorrow afternoon. Judge Adkins has an opening for us. Wanna come?" he said. Kathy had to smile at him, he sounded like he was offering a trip to the ice cream shop. *'Hey wanna get some ice cream, or a baby.'*

"Wanna come! Are you kidding! Wanna come?" Janet said, folding her arms.

"We will be there. We have been waiting forever for this. Late notice or not, we'll take it." Perry said, smiling.

Kathy smiled, and held up her ring for them to see.

"Ooohhh, come on in so we can see better," Janet said, leading them inside, "And properly meet you," she said, giving Jason a hard look over her shoulder, and mouthing *"Your phone broke?"*

He smiled and shrugged. "There was a really horrible murder. It was very distracting," he mouthed back.

She gave him a doubtful frown, "Murder or not, what could be more distracting than your lover being pregnant?"

He shrugged again, and continued to smile. "I told you, we just found out this morning. Anything else..."

"Yeah, I heard you... Lucky gossip."

"How far along are you?" Perry asked, pulling out a chair for Kathy at the dining room table.

She couldn't stop smiling, "I am not sure. We haven't been to the doctor yet. It can't be that far, two and a half weeks at the most. Probably just enough for the test to work."

"Come on, sit and have some tea and pound cake, while we discuss the

wedding," Janet said, setting some plates down in front of them.

Kathy noticed a beautifully made scrap quilt hanging on the wall. "That is a beautiful quilt," She said, leaning over to look closer. She had to smile at herself as her eyes automatically searched for the white patch with red rose buds. Of course it won't be here.

"That's all my babies' clothes. That black piece right in front of you is from Mike's graduation gown. The dark blue above it is from Jason's first photo outfit. It was the cutest little sailor suit. And this is Madeline's pre-school jumper." She pointed at the pieces as she named them.

Kathy smiled.

"Way to make me feel like a five-year-old, Mom." Jason folded his arms and sat down next to Kathy. "Cute sailor suit," he swore under his breath.

"Keep it up, and I cut a swatch out of that uniform."

"Have you studied any quilt history?" Kathy asked.

"Oh, don't get her started," Jason said rolling his eyes. "And I will leave that comment to each of you to decide who it is in reference to." He pointed at both of them.

Perry smiled at Jason, "Well they say sons marry women like their mothers."

"You hush," Janet said, swiping toward Jason on her way into the kitchen. She immediately returned with some cake and a pitcher of tea.

Jason smiled, and unfolded his arms, "Her favorite books are ones that focus on quilts of the Underground Railroad. There is one she has bought four copies of, because she has worn it out." He sounded exasperated. "Mom has much in common with Lauren, when it comes to remembering history, as in making it more pleasant than it should be. For example, if she was asked about Hurricane Katrina, it was a really fun time with her family as they grilled outside. Never mind the hideous snake and gator infestations, or being without electricity for a month in 95 degrees."

"Don't compare me to that lunatic. Katrina was a decent time for a

family barbecue. You take the moments you have, not the ones you wish you had." She frowned at him as she set a piece of cake on his plate. "And the quilt book was a good story. I needed to copy some of the patterns. The copy machine sort of flattened the binding, after fifty or sixty times." She picked up the pitcher and poured some tea in Kathy's glass. "I have made, and sold mind you, eight historical replica quilts for various organizations."

"Caffeine?" Jason said.

"Over protective?" his mother shot back. She turned back to Kathy. "Don't worry, It's decaf for Perry."

Kathy smiled and sipped her tea. Jason might look like his dad on the outside, but he was his mother on the inside. "What about this one?" She pointed to a flannel piece with teddy bears on the quilt.

"Jason's sister, Madeline...Maddy. He did at least tell you he had a family? Her husband was recently promoted and transferred to Chicago," Janet said, pouring a tea for Perry, who was still smiling. Apparently Mother/Son banter was the norm because he seemed unperturbed it.

Kathy nodded, "I met Mike first."

Janet nodded in return, "He texted me when you moved in that he found a girl for Jason, but Jason was being difficult. Then he texted me that Jason stayed the night with you."

Kathy smiled and blushed. "Well, Mike is rather involved isn't he?"

Jason folded his arms. "He's a nosy..."

Perry stood and pointed to a flannel piece with cowboys and horses, "That is the one from Jason's pajamas from Kindergarten. You'll have to ignore the brother banter. They have always been that way. Too far apart I think. Maddy's in between them. She was always the peacekeeper."

Kathy smiled at the flannel piece. "Cowboys? I would have figured you more for dinosaurs, or the teddy bears."

"Yeah, yeah," he said smiling. "The white one with the green stripe is from baseball. The purple and gold one is from high school football. Mom,

aren't you collecting for a grandchildren one? At least I'll finally have something to contribute to that one."

"Oh yes, Sweetheart. I have several patches already. And soon as that one outgrows his...or her swaddling blanket." She pointed at Kathy. "I'll be needing a swatch of that too."

They spent the afternoon talking and enjoying the quiet. It all seemed so normal, until the quintessential 'Dodger' question was asked by Jason's mother.

"What about your parents? Are they coming? Is that enough time for them to get here?"

Kathy wasn't sure what to say. She hadn't even discussed her parents at length with Jason, and now she was sorry. "They don't approve of me, so they don't bother to talk to me very often."

Both Perry and Janet looked at each other, and then to Jason.

"What don't they approve of?" Janet asked. Kathy could tell she was trying not to sigh, too obviously. Yes, Jason, was definitely his mother's son.

"My career choice." She now desperately wished she had this conversation with Jason already. Hopefully he wouldn't get upset. She hadn't thought about the vast wealth difference, because she had basically written them out of her life.

"Your career choice? But the title of homicide detective is an impressive accomplishment, especially in a city that big," Perry said confused. "I'll bet you had to beat out a hundred candidates to get the job."

"Not hundreds, but a lot." Kathy nodded, may as well get it over with. "My parents are what common folks would call '*people who live in the 1% wealth gap*.' I was to be one of my father's client's trophy-wife, like my mother was to him. I was to '*come to my senses and leave law enforcement*.' When I refused and went for the promotion to detective instead their stud pick for me, they basically cut me out of their lives. My father lost the client, but gained four others, so I am not sure what his problem was. I am not a

bargaining chip for his business deals. For crying out loud, I felt like a useless princess being sold off to a neighboring king who was threatening war unless he sold his only daughter into the king's bed."

All three of them stared at her.

"I guess that would explain why you made that comment about the Caine granddaughter." Jason patted her knee.

She smiled weakly. "I didn't mean to sound bitter. The good news is that I am their only child, so like it or not, I am getting everything. Or, at least most of it, in the end, probate is probate."

"Do they know about Jason, or the baby?" Perry asked.

She nodded, "Yes, I was actually hoping my mother would come down to see the house after...well, after everything has calmed down. She loves to decorate. Their penthouse is like an Ode to HGTV's Dream House. We will all have to go visit this summer. I love summer in Manhattan, Jason wants to see Central park." They have three guest bedrooms, and can be polite for a weekend."

Janet perked up, "That would be lovely. We would love to visit."

"Well that explains your lack of reaction to all the gold," Jason said smiling.

"What gold?" Janet asked.

"Kathy found forty-seven million dollars in gold hidden in the house. She's starting a foundation with it to help crime victims."

"Forty-seven million dollars?" his parents said in unison.

Kathy explained her ideas for the foundation. "It's the perfect stay-at-home-mom job."

Both Janet and Perry smiled, "So you have your own money and direction?" they, again, said in unison.

Jason looked appalled.

Kathy laughed, "I am not Lauren, by a long shot. And, I certainly never considered going out for cheerleading, unless it involved throwing a boot at someone."

"Thank God!" Janet said, exhaling.

"Mother!"

"Sarah told me the whole story," Kathy said, patting Jason's knee.

Jason frowned. "Well, she is Mike's wife. Those two nosy folks were made for each other."

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed much easier. Kathy felt welcomed in to the family.

The next morning Kathy walked across the street to the dress shop to meet Janet and Sarah. She tried on several white sun dresses and maxi dresses. They also had a fistful of flyers announcing the marriage, and that Kathy and Jason would have a table with cake at the next town fish fry for anyone who wanted to celebrate with them.

The shop owner, Candy, was thrilled to help Kathy pick out a dress. She was also surprised to hear Jason was getting married in less than three hours.

"No one ever thought Jason...Chief Rose, would ever get married after that horrible cheerleader woman, and then poor love-sick Lauren didn't help matters," Candy said, holding up a mostly white multi-color dress.

Kathy smiled and took it into the change room.

"Yes, stupid cheerleader," Janet said. "I am still appalled at that whole situation, especially since she was allowed to walk away after destroying his life. She shot at him for Heaven's Sake, and they didn't even think that warranted a psychological evaluation. Alcoholic *so and so*! And, I have nothing productive to add regarding Lauren without actually resorting to swearing. She used to be so nice, so normal."

"She was never normal," Sarah shook her head in disagreement. "She only wanted Jason because he showed her a kindness in like Second grade, or something. She is a mousy, stalking, bitch, and I am sure there is more to the story of Jason terminating her than *private human resource issues*."

Candy nodded in agreement, "I came through school a couple of years ahead of Jason and Lauren, and people thought she was a loon then. She got into the whole quilt history thing to get close to you, so you would like her, figuring..."

Janet sighed, "That if momma approved, Jason would fall in lock-step. Ha, not only is she crazy, but she is certainly lacking in intelligence if she thinks I have any influence over Jason and who he dates, or falls in love with." She motioned toward the door where Kathy was changing.

Kathy came out of the change room. "I love it!" she hugged the white sun dress around herself. It fit perfectly and the thin multicolor pinstripes complemented her figure perfectly. "I have to have it. How much is it?"

"\$120, but with the wedding discount, \$85 will do fine."

Janet held up a blue crystal necklace, "Something borrowed and blue."

"It's beautiful, thank you." Kathy pulled her hair back so Janet could clasp it on.

"It was mine from long ago. Perry gave it to me after Jason was born."

"I have something too. I made it, so you have something new." Sarah passed her a blue crystal bracelet that matched the necklace.

Kathy put it on. "They both look so incredible with the dress." She couldn't stop smiling. Everything was going so well. Her soon-to-be mother and sister-in-law were friendly and inviting. She couldn't wait to get the rest of her life started.

Jason had planned to go to work for only fifteen or twenty minutes. His intention had been to get the next three days covered so he could spend some time with his new wife, and possibly drive to the coast for a couple of

days if she wanted to. But, there would be no such luck.

Alan had told him that someone called doing a background check on him, a very thorough one. Alan had refused to answer questions based on the fact that the man refused to identify himself. Instead he had referred the man to the city website. Jason's Bio was there along with the other local city leaders.

He was attempting to reverse search the blocked phone number, to no avail, when Alan knocked on his door. "I really hate to interrupt you today, but I think you need to talk to these two." He motioned them into the office. It was Chuck and Nori, two of the landscapers Kathy had hired to clear the overgrowth on the fence.

"Hello, Chief. It's Nori and Chuck." Nori Lucas said, first pointing at himself, and then to Chuck Davenport. He was carrying a medium sized, soft package.

Jason had to smile. "I can see that Nori. What do you need?" He had known Nori since 7th grade when his family moved here. He always introduced himself to people he knew, as if he expected them to forget who he was.

"This package was left at the house by the Post Office. It's addressed to Mrs. Kathleen Rose. It came out of Baton Rouge." He set the package down on Jason's desk.

"I thought her name was Marconi? And, that she was a Miss." Chuck looked deflated.

Jason tried not to smile too broadly in Chuck's face. "We're getting married in about two hours. It must be from her mother." He doubted it, they only decided to get married yesterday. It had overnight stamped on it. Still, there was no way her mother could have had something sent that quickly.

Chuck's eyes got wide. He stared at Nori, who stammered a bit before stating, "I don't think so. Dark Lady says there is evil in the package." His eyes widen, really big. "And, that we should bring it to you, and not let someone called '*Mistress*' touch it. Said she'd have us both whipped bloody if

Mistress got the package. We don't want to end up like poor Mill!" He fidgeted with his fingers as he said the last part.

Chuck nodded his head in agreement, swatting at Nori's fidgeting to make him stop. "Do you think Miss. Marconi...Mrs. Rose will mind if we take the rest of the day off? I am afraid of Dark Lady. She's scary. I don't wanna whipping. What if she calls ole Ridely to whip us!"

Jason shook his head no, and sighed, "I don't think she will mind. But, if you aren't coming back to finish the job, please let her know sometime tomorrow so she can hire someone else."

Instead of turning and leaving, they backed out of his office, looking frightened, both of them nodding and fidgeting with their fingers, before Chuck realized what he was doing, and swatted at Nori again. "Stop, y'all are making me twiddle my fingers."

If there wasn't so much going today Jason would have found the fact that Chuck called Nori, y'all, like he had a mouse in his pocket, amusing. Not today, today, he just wanted them out, so he could focus on getting married.

As soon as they left Alan came back in. "Those two are perfect examples of why people in the north think white southerners are inbred," he said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "You gonna open it?"

"Hopefully in just a second." He took out his phone and called Kathy. In a roundabout way, he informed her that a package arrived for her, it looked like it was evidence related, and did she mind if he opened it. She didn't mind.

Alan handed Jason his pocket knife.

"Thanks."

He opened the package, to find two more packages. "Open me first," Jason read on the smaller package. He opened it, inside was a Best Wishes card and some wedding cookies. He smacked Alan's hand. "Don't eat one. Dark Lady said they were evil." He decided to leave the card closed, for now. It was probably an anthrax letter, or something equally horrible.

"Really, since when do you believe in her?" Alan folded his arms giving Jason a doubtful look.

"Since...Never mind when." Jason smiled at the memory of his first time making love with Kathy. He reached for some of the cyanide tests that the CDC doctor had ran off and left at Kathy's.

Alan frowned. "Poison? Who would poison Kathy? She's a sweetheart."

"That's what we're trying to find out. The really crazy aspect is the fact that this is tied to Milton Lawrence, somehow. I think someone is trying to kill her by making it look like a supernatural-Dark Lady thing, but where does Mil fit in?" He set the test next to the cookies, and opened the larger package. He bent over to peek in, without touching the contents of the bag. He knew what it was at once. A frigid perspiration ran up his spine as he gently backed away, motioning for Alan to move as well.

Alan backed up, "What is it?"

"Do not! Touch that!" Jason said, running to the restroom to wash his hands and hoping whatever was on there wasn't airborne. "Don't sniff it, either!" he called, just in case.

"Is that one of your mother's quilts? She made you a red one. Do you have any red decor? Why would she mail it?"

"She wouldn't, and no it isn't one of hers. Just don't touch it. Go get an evidence bag that will seal completely, and notify the sheriff's department that we need a crime scene technician trained to handle a HazMat situation, possibly cyanide."

"Right away, Chief," Alan said, snapping to attention. He did not like Jason's tone. "Jesus, I almost stole one of her cookies!" He made the phone call and went back to help Jason.

They carefully read the directions for the test, and then decided to wait for the lab technician since they didn't have the extra equipment needed to process it.

"No sense in accidentally poisoning ourselves."

"Hey Jason. Don't let this ruin the day. Go get dressed. I'll lock the door and close the blinds to your office. No one will come in. I can standby for the Sheriff's team. I will let them know what we suspect. Besides if Kathy is in danger, you need to be close to her. She doesn't need to be out there alone. It would kill me if anything happened to her or the baby."

"Trust me, Kathy can handle herself." Jason's first instinct was to say no, but Alan was right. He absolutely, could not be late for his own humble wedding. As simple as everything was, people had still up-heaved their schedules. His favorite judge had continued some cases to open the space on his calendar to marry them. He needed to go home, get dressed, and get married.

On the way home, he stopped and got three wrapped roses for Kathy to carry. One for him, one for her, and one for the baby.

Two hours later the judge pronounced them husband and wife. Mike and Sarah had acted as the official witnesses. There were a lot of congratulations, and back-patting from people passing by in the courthouse.

Kathy hadn't stopped smiling since Jason gave her the three roses. They both showed everyone their new rings. Some of the court clerks wanted her to throw the roses. She hated to part with them, but Jason nodded.

"It's good luck. Besides the girls want to know who is getting married next." He smiled, and turned her to face away from the clerks who had gathered to catch the flowers.

She threw the roses over her shoulder. There was a clamor, and the victorious girl ran a small victory lap around the courthouse lobby before they headed back to their court rooms.

Janet and Perry hugged both Jason and Kathy.

"I am so happy for you two," Janet said, wiping away tears.

Jason smiled. He was happy there was no mention of the fact that the two barely knew each other a month. Kathy had not talked with her parents since she told them she was getting married, and a baby was on the way. She had called them back, but they had flipped out, again, and not in a good

way. She had reminded her mother, twice, that she was old enough to decide for herself whether or not to get married. As to the baby, she had warmed up to the idea, and would be a mother regardless of her decision to marry Jason. That comment had triggered a whole new debate. Still, Kathy was a bit disappointed they didn't at least call to wish her Best Wishes this morning. He would wait a few days and try to talk to her again about it. Right now, she was still frustrated with them.

He spotted Lauren walking through the courthouse, deliberately ignoring them. He could tell, because she was facing one of the court rooms, but her eyes were corned toward Kathy. He caught up with her while Kathy continued to show off her ring to his mother's friends. "We got the package. Thank you for the cookies."

She flipped him the bird over her shoulder, then turned to face him. "I didn't send you anything. I just heard a rumor you got married, and had come to see if it was true."

"And the red quilt from your bed. But, why did you drive all the way to Baton Rouge to mail it?"

She stared at him, and folded her arms. "I didn't give you my red quilt! I want that back! Along with my Ann Klein's."

"So it is yours? And, I seriously doubt you would want it back."

"Jason, it's one of the few valuable pieces I have left. Please, it was the one I made with your mother. It was..."

"Let me guess...Stolen. You listen to me, you thieving little psychotic bitch. When those lab tests come back. I am going to lock you up...forever." He whispered in her ear. "And, ever."

"I don't know what you are talking about. How could I mail you a wedding gift if I didn't even know you were getting married?" Bitter tears ran down her face. "The only thing I know is that the man I have wanted since Second grade just married someone he has known less than a month. Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Leave you alone!" Jason nearly yelled. "You have been up my ass,

stalking me for decades. You left stains on my desk calendar, I had to throw it out in a bio-hazard bag."

"Leave me alone." She spun on her heel and walked out, flipping him another bird over her shoulder.

Kathy joined Jason, taking his arm and smiling at him in a way that made him melt.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Later," he said pulling her close. "I will tell you later. Let's say our final hellos and good-bye's, and then get out of here." He really needed to be alone with her. If he wasn't distracted by that package in his office, he was distracted at the thought of being alone with his wife, with her actually being his wife. Regardless, he needed to not be in a crowd.

They greeted a few more people, and Jason led her to the Jeep. He had hoped to talk her into leaving for the coast right away, but he should probably tell her about the package before anything was planned. He sat in the driver's seat, and then leaned over to kiss her. "Hello, Mrs. Rose."

She smiled and kissed him back. "Hello. Mr. Rose. I think you got a ticket?" She pointed at an official looking piece of paper under his wiper blade.

He looked at the windshield. "I am parked legally. Besides, I am the Chief, whose going to write me a ticket that doesn't want to spend the rest of their career writing parking tickets to anyone with less police power than me?" He reached out and grabbed it.

Need you? Found more info about that package...Alan. P.S. didn't call, didn't want to interrupt, but you need to see this; so does the Mrs. before you head out.'

"Jason, what was in the *package*?" Kathy asked, staring at the note.

He got out, and rounded the Jeep to let Kathy out. "It was addressed to Mrs. Kathleen Rose. It had a card, probably poison cookies, and a red quilt. The landscapers brought it. Said, Dark Lady told them it was an evil package and to not let Mistress touch it. So, I am guessing there is cyanide

in the cookies, since the killer seems to be following the Caine story. But the cyanide part of the case hasn't been released...The curator knows. Alan told her. I sent him over the other day to let her know we didn't have the original items back, but might have something more interesting for her. Her and Lauren are besties from way back. Way, way back. Damn, Lauren's name keeps coming up here."

"What! Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"You, and everyone else looked so at ease. I figured I would just tell you when we got home, so I could selfishly enjoy that look on your face during the wedding. The one that told me you were concentrating on being happy about marrying me." He held her hand and crossed the street into the police station. He smiled as she leaned into him as they crossed. It felt so good to finally have someone who felt the same way he did about the relationship.

The Two Sheriff's Deputies were still there. Everything was sealed in airtight bags.

"Hello, and congratulations Chief and Mrs. Rose." One of the Deputies said, smiling. He held up a clear, sealed bag, with a red bio-hazard sticker on it. A greeting card was inside, the front was plastered with roses, and read *On Your Special Day*. "I am Deputy Miller, this is Deputy Bordeaux. I am sorry to bother you, but do you have any idea what this means."

There was a message scrawled inside the card, "*You don't get to keep it, Bitch.*"

"Keep what?" Kathy asked, confused. "If they didn't want me to have the package, why did they send it?"

"That's what we were hoping you were going to tell us," Deputy Miller asked, looking at the note.

"Is that Lauren's handwriting? Jason, she isn't talking about the baby, is she? I just want to be Mrs. Rose. The only one that seems upset about that is Lauren, but she wouldn't call you 'it.' She would say 'leave MY Jason alone.'"

He could see that Kathy stifled a bit of panic. He worried that things were too stressful. There was too much going on. The adrenaline was pumping too hard, and too often.

She turned to him, "Do you have any old reports she wrote? Do think she means the baby?" She held her hands over her lower abdomen.

Jason both shrugged and nodded. "Lauren writes in obnoxious all capital, size 2 font, block lettering, rather than anything, anyone who is sane might mistake for handwriting."

"I am sorry, Mrs. Rose, but with the amount of cyanide in these cookies, I am surprised Jason and Alan were not affected. There are traces on the card too. Whoever put this together got it all over. So, I took that to mean your life, not just the baby's. The quilt seems to be a failsafe, I am guessing in case you didn't eat the cookies, because it is also poisoned with a very large *soaking* in cyanide. Once you put this on your bed, and fell asleep under it, if you sweat at all, it would have taken all three of you." Deputy Miller pointed at Jason, Kathy, and Kathy's abdomen.

Deputy Bordeaux nodded in agreement. He changed the filter on his camera and took a super close-up photo of the card. "Wait, there is a block letter impression on the envelope of the card." He stood up straight and held his camera out, flipping back to the photo he just took. The filter he had used highlighted the perfect little writing impressions on the card. "Look familiar," he said, holding up the camera screen for Jason to see.

"It's hard to tell, with that damned blocking she does with her lettering. Alan can you pull a couple of the reports Lauren wrote and make copies for the deputies, so they can compare them later."

Alan nodded, and went over to the large bank of file cabinets behind his desk area.

Deputy Bordeaux sighed. "Mrs. Rose, are you sure there isn't something you are overlooking? What could the suspect want you to give up?"

Kathy shook her head. "I don't know. The only person who has a real beef with me, has been accounted for. Lauren Grayson is the other one. She wants my house and my husband. The thing that is confusing is Lee

Wilson."

Jason stiffened, "What about Randy's wife. What did she lose?"

"She walked away from him. I can't really say what she lost? New York is a maintenance state, or more commonly referred to as alimony. She couldn't have lost much. However, her middle name is Lee, and her maiden name is Wilson."

Both deputies nodded. One spoke up, "What about this Lauren? An old girl of yours?"

Jason made a face and shook his head. "An ex-officer, who wishes she was a girlfriend. She also had a vested interest in Kathy's death with the deed of Kathy's house being transferred to her if Kathy died, but she has since released the claim. Especially once she became a murder suspect in the Lawrence case. She also stole money from school kids. She was probably going to be fired upon the completion of the independent investigation, but I fired her early when she sat on my desk, nude, spread eagle, and offered sex in exchange for, ironically, not firing her for stealing the money."

Kathy made a face, and then closed her eyes. "That was too much of a vivid picture of the mousy Lauren. I will never be in your office again without that picture in her head."

Deputy Miller also made a face, and glanced over at the desk, frowning. "Do you think this package and the Lawrence case are related?" he asked, pointing at the quilt. "There was a red quilt that went missing there. I couldn't find it in evidence, nor could I find it in the photos I saw the other crime scene technician take."

Jason shrugged. "I honestly didn't think so, but the more time goes on the more undeniable it is that Milton's killer is not only after Kathy, but that she may be the prime target, with poor Milton as the cover up."

Deputy Miller loaded his box with the evidence. "Sounds like Lauren may have some answers here? If she is an ex-officer of yours, perhaps we should take over investigating her verses her old department doing it? It could help avoid court complications later."

"Yes, the sooner I am done having to think about that whole situation the better, bury her if you have to," Jason nodded. "Alan, pull her human resources file, and make sure they have copies. I am sure they can have a search warrant faxed over later to cover the legal bases on her file. When it comes make sure you have the package ready for them pick up with copies of everything we have on her, the Lawrence case, and Kathy can email over some her stuff on Ms. Wilson."

Alan and Deputy Moore nodded. "We can have the warrant in two hours. Someone got married, so I am sure the judge will be in catch up mode."

Both Jason and Kathy smiled.

"Well I am sure you two have other plans, why don't you two go ahead as planned," Deputy Bordeaux said, smiling. "We'll process this, and we can reconnect Monday morning to share notes. We'll also take care of notifying the CDC about the poisoning attempt. We should be able to get some preliminary stuff processed by then." He picked up his evidence kit.

"Sounds good." Jason turned to Alan. "You got the fort until Friday afternoon. I'll be in around one or two. Give these two whatever they need for any follow-up they may wish to pursue."

"Yes sir." Alan said, making copies of Lauren's reports, and her personnel file.

The deputies loaded up their van, and then went across the street to the courthouse for a warrant to cover Lauren's personal information in her human resources file.

He pulled Kathy outside. "Come on. Let's get out of town. I have a great small, friendly place we can visit on the coast. You like the Gulf of Mexico? I need to be where no one can find us, not even friendly people." He needed to exhale! He needed to peel that dress off of her.

She nodded, "I am suddenly feeling very tired, probably from all the excitement."

"I am not sure excitement is the right word."

They went home, packed, and headed out for the two hour drive to the coast. He felt relieved to be out of town. He noticed that she kept looking at the road behind them in the passenger door mirror.

"No one has behind us for a long time. Rest," he said, caressing her face.

She kissed his hand, and relaxed. The next time he looked over, she was sleeping.

"We're here," Jason said, gently shaking her awake. "You feel OK? You look pale."

"Hungry. Let's get something awesome to eat, and forget everything until Friday," she said stretching.

"I know a place on the beach. They have the best comfort foods. Let's check in, and then walk over." He had been coming here with his family since he could remember. He couldn't wait to share the small seaside tourist town with her.

Kathy nodded, and followed him. They ate their favorite foods, and then lazed around the next two days as they decompressed. Talk turned to baby names and whether or not football was allowed if they had a boy.

SHERIFF RAINIER'S BREAK IN THE CASE

Monday morning Kathy was feeling nauseous. She snuggled in closer to Jason in their bed at his apartment. She wasn't sure if it was morning sickness or the pending meeting regarding the deputy's report. She seemed to go through the nausea at least every other day or so. It was getting old. She couldn't wait for this part to be over. Her mother told her when she was pregnant with Kathy, her nausea had gone away when she started showing. If like mother-like daughter rang true, that meant she had another two, possibly three months of this.

She laid there willing her stomach to calm down.

Last night she called her mother to firm up visiting plans, which turned her attention toward the house. The outside and the kitchen looked fantastic. The yard was coming along and would be much better by the time they arrived. Thankfully Nori and Chuck had come back to work. Everything else at the house...Well, that left something to be desired.

She knew her parents would not like the local motel, so she moved her master bedroom down on the list, and the '*official*' guest room up on the list, along with making over the bathroom. She had two full weeks. She knew the bedroom could be done, but probably not the bathroom. She doubted she could talk Phil and his men into coming back, at any price. Maybe she could get a counter and a toilet and have Jason help. She could do the tub/shower later.

"You're awake early." Jason sounded like he was still sleeping.

"Can't help it. What do you suppose the deputies will report today?" she said, snuggling in closer to him.

He stretched, "Let's shower, eat, and go find out," he patted her lower abdomen twice, and got up.

She smiled, "You really are happy with the idea of being of father."

"I love my whole life, and yes, I am happy with the idea of being a father." He held out his hand. "Shower?"

She smiled again. It felt warm and good to be loved so much. She took his hand and joined him in the shower. Her stomach calming down.

They ate, and then wandered down the street to the police station. The deputies were just pulling up when they walked through the door.

Jason walked into his office. He frowned at the big, fifty-year-old, ugly wooden desk that they had pulled from the town's surplus warehouse. His 'normal' desk had been taken and destroyed on the outside chance that some of the cyanide got on it.

"Really, this is Ridiculous. Why didn't they just clean it," he said frustrated. "Scary part is that the Town Council did this. There is no good reason for them to take my desk. This is a big oak monster that doesn't offer anything that could remotely be mistaken for modern storage."

She shrugged, "Still it has a nice large flat work space to spread stuff out."

"Pffhpt!" He put his hands over his eyes. Apparently Kathy wasn't the only one couldn't be in his office without picturing Lauren.

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I meant case files."

Deputies Miller and Bordeaux entered with Sheriff Rainier, and Dr. Silvia Lacompfe from the CDC.

Kathy wondered, *Lacompfe, where do I know that name? Holy Cow!* She pulled out her tablet and brought up her research from the old newspapers. Lacompfe was the reporter's name who was trying to expose the Caine's, in

particular Percy for his kidnapping-trafficking scheme.

Jason led them into the small conference room and briefed them on the entire case. Then Kathy gave the historical evidence she had uncovered since the murderer seemed to using it as inspiration. She also briefed them on what happened with Randy in New York, and that his wife seemed to be missing. No one had seen her in at least a month.

The Sheriff nodded. Kathy noted that he had a little box that looked very old in front of him. "We'll notify the FBI and see if they have any resources to help with her. Meanwhile, we found prints on the wedding cookie box. They aren't Lauren's. They are unidentified, but if Carrie Bell has never been arrested, or held a job where printing would be required, we wouldn't have them. We did however find one of Lauren's hairs on the red quilt."

Jason nodded, "She said someone stole it."

The Sheriff shook his head, no. "The little block letter impressions on the wedding card match her handwriting samples on her police reports. The impression is from where she wrote the Lawrence address on a piece of paper that was laying on top of the card's envelope. We have a warrant for her arrest. Two of my deputies and Alan will be here with her in a few minutes. We think she is working with someone else."

"Two of them?" Kathy said surprised. "How could Lauren and Carrie even know each other?"

The Sheriff shrugged, "We'll be able to question her in a minute. Hopefully we will learn more then. The only thing I know for sure is that if you found the real information, a research historical librarian, with a law degree would have been able to find the same information, meaning Lauren was keeping that information to herself for some reason. She also would have unrestricted access to the archive reports here, meaning she wouldn't have had to sign out reports because she was an employee. She simply would have made copies and put them back, without anyone knowing. That would explain the William Caine mimic, verses Dark Lady. Meanwhile, I would like to go ahead and call in the FBI regarding Carrie Lee Wilson-Bell being a person of interest in this case. But first," He held up the box, "It's

copies of my great-grandmother's, Hattie's diary. I thought your wife might like copies for her collection of research on the Underground Railroad. Seemed to be the perfect Wedding gift."

"Oh, thank you!" Kathy said, smiling and taking the box. "It is perfect! I can hardly wait to read it."

"My pleasure. I am happy someone is in a position to be able to showcase them." He motioned for Jason to lead the way. "Let's go ahead and make that call."

"Absolutely, this way." Jason led the Sheriff out of the conference room and into his office.

Dr. Lacompote smiled kindly at Kathy, "You know, Dr. Newsome seems to think your house is haunted."

Kathy stuck with her story, it was after all, still true. "I have heard that from more than one person, but I have never seen a ghost there."

"He also apologized for running out."

Kathy sighed. "There is no need. The movers ran out, the contractors ran out, the landscapers won't return, unless I am there to make sure Dark Lady won't talk to them. At this point it would be weird if someone actually wanted to stay at my house, so why not the Doctor?"

"Because he is more professional. I would like to inspect the house, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. I need to be there for the landscapers later anyway," Kathy said smiling. She couldn't wait to get home. Haunted or not, it had welcomed her. She just needed to talk Jason...her husband...into moving in.

"I also have my own package for you," she handed Kathy a flash drive. "Apparently my great-grandfathers had an obsession of hunting the Caine's but could never..." She was cut off by a commotion out front.

"This! Is a violation! Of! My rights!"

Kathy put the flash drive in her pocket. She could hear Lauren

screaming, and what sounded like someone kicking the tables and cabinets. She had screamed herself hoarse as the last words were hatefully hacked-up.

Kathy had to cover her mouth. "I am almost ashamed for her."

"Don't be, she's a Blanc in her heart, through and through," Dr. Lacompte said, shaking her head in disgust.

"You can add assault and resisting arrest to the charges," Alan said, in a tone that suggested he was grinning.

Kathy heard the door to the cell slam, and key turn. She smiled, they still used keys here, and not the electric doors. She opened the door and peeked out.

She heard Alan's voice. "She's locked up, if you want to talk to her now." He said, knocking on Jason's door, and then backed off as he realized they were still on the phone.

Kathy and Dr. Lacompte waited about ten or fifteen minutes for the Sheriff and Jason came out of his office before they came out of the conference room.

Jason approached the cell putting his arm around Kathy as she came out of the conference room. "Why?" he asked looking at Lauren.

"Why! What!" she screeched at him. "What is it that you have invented to charge me with?"

Kathy feared Lauren would have a stroke with the way the veins on her neck were popping out.

"Homicide, Attempted Homicide, Burglary, and Felony Vandalism," Jason said, sounding very serious, but the corners of his mouth had a slight upturn to it.

"Homicide!" she squeaked out. Her voice was failing with all her screaming.

Kathy stepped forward, taking the cell bar with her left hand, and showing off her ring. "How did you meet Carrie Bell? You may know her as

Lee Wilson."

Lauren stared at the ring. "You breeze in here, buy my house out from under me, take my man and now you..."

"I am not, nor was I ever, your man! I was your boss." Jason protested. "There is a huge difference."

"Jace," Lauren stared at him.

"Don't call me that. Only Mike calls me that. To you I am Chief Rose."

"Fine, Chief...Rose Carrie said if I could help her, then I could have the house." Lauren said, talking slower and slower. She looked at the bars, and then Sheriff Rainier. "I didn't know she was planning on killing Milton Lawrence. She just said that in the end I could have the house. The clause was her idea. How was I to know she was going to carry it too far?"

"No the clause wasn't," Kathy said, folding her arms, again, carefully making sure her ring was in Lauren's full view. "No one in New York even knew I bought the house until after the closing. If you remember correctly I had forgotten about it. You called to remind me. If I didn't know, or remember, how could I have told anyone I was coming? You missed your chance to kill me and dump me in the bayou. Boy, I would have been a missing person report, forever if you had killed me right after the closing. I uploaded photos to my Facebook page, again, after the closing. However, once I returned to New York, anyone and everyone knew. That would have been when Carrie found out. I'll bet this was a crime of opportunity you stumbled onto later, or shall I say a conspiracy of opportunity, in order to keep your own hands clean. How did you meet her?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. She may have called about my book. I get a ton of calls on it. I told her what I found in my research for the book."

Jason looked at her with such an expression of doubt that Kathy wasn't sure he didn't just swear at her silently.

Sheriff Rainier handed her a copy of the warrant. "You, and you alone, put the clause in the sale of the house regarding Kathy's death? I am sure

any reasonable person could easily figure out what that meant. You also have a well-documented obsession with your *former* boss here. I am sure you were planning on being there for him in his grief at the death of his wife, lover at the time," he said, referring to the 'reasonable person' standard a jury uses to make decisions. "You were Carrie Bell's puppet master, because she had no idea of how to carry that out without your direct support. At the minimum you are an accomplice after the fact, at max, a co-conspirator."

The color drained from Lauren's face. "But, I didn't do anything..."

The Sheriff shrugged. "From this side of the bars, it looks like you knew Bell was unhinged, and that you were hoping to take advantage of it to get the house. As to comforting Chief Rose in his grief, it sounds like you might have overestimated that relationship." He turned to the new deputy and Alan. "Did you read her, her Miranda Rights?"

They both nodded. "Just like you said, Sheriff."

He nodded, "Go ahead and process the assault and resisting arrest charges as well. Send it directly over to the District Attorney, and find out if he wants to come over now, or be briefed later."

They both nodded and went over to Alan's desk.

Lauren slumped down on the lone steel cot in the cell. "I want an attorney, now." Her voice was husky, like she was holding back tears.

"I will bury you out at the old Blanc Plantation prison." Jason said, with a coldness that Kathy had not heard him use. "You can have your old family plot back. Be buried with your ancestors."

Lauren balled up in the corner of the cot. Her hands were shaking as she put them over her ears.

"Since we can't ask her any more questions. I will just comment out loud to you," The Sheriff said to Kathy, "Do you think she would have told us were Carrie Lee Wilson-Bell is hiding?"

Lauren whimpered in the corner of the cell, and then began crying hysterically. She started chanting almost imperceptibly, "Why couldn't you

just love me?" She rocked back and forth as she chanted the same thing over and over again.

Kathy shrugged, "I think she fed Carrie all the behind the scenes information to stage it to look supernatural. As a side note: Carrie fought with a trained police officer for twenty years, kicking his ass on more than one occasion. Milton Lawrence was no match for her stout-trained figure. Lauren was just taking advantage to get what she wanted. The clause was a lucky happenstance, or I suppose an unlucky one for her, since it was what ultimately cast the light on her. I don't think she meant to become the puppet master, but the reality is that, Carrie isn't smart enough to carry this out on this level. So, Lauren kept getting roped in deeper and deeper; and never made any effort to back out."

Lauren looked at the rubber mattress. There were no sheets to hang herself with. All she had was her jeans and blouse. She needed to kill herself now, before she lost the nerve. She stood up and turned to face Jason, "You don't appreciate anything, you ungrateful bastard! Taking up with this Yankee whore, after all I have done for you. You never bothered to investigate the cheerleader's murder. It had been easy to kill that lush. Everyone thought she killed herself in a drunk driving incident, it was all too easy!" She took in a quivering breath. "If Lee had listened to me, everyone would have thought the ghost was involved. She would have been able to get away with murder. But, no. She had to, for some insane reason, kill Milton Lawrence. Too bad she didn't get her face shot off by Kathy that morning. If it hadn't been for me telling her about the hidden stairs in the library and the downstairs parlor, she would be dead. The whore here should also be dead! Just like the cheerleader bitch! Just like anyone who sleeps with you should be."

Jason smiled at her, "I do appreciate the confession, thank you very much, ma'am."

Kathy scoffed, "You crazy bitch! You really thought these people were stupid enough to think a ghost killed me?"

"Come on," The Sheriff ushered everyone back into the conference room. "We have a manhunt to organize. Alan can you find out who her attorney is and call him?"

"Yes, Sheriff," Alan said, stepping forward.

Dr. Lacompte pulled Kathy to the side. "Let's leave them to it. Do you think we can go to the library at your house?"

It wasn't Kathy who answered. It was Jason. "Kathy isn't going anywhere without me. Not until that lunatic is in the cell with Lauren."

"Jason, I can handle myself."

"I love and respect you. But this is a police matter...in a jurisdiction over which I am the Chief. I am not going to allow anyone, especially my wife, to be a murder victim. I am very sorry, but you are not going anywhere without me, or some sort of guard. We don't know everything Lauren's got planned, and we are certainly out of the loop on Carrie Bell."

Kathy smiled. She wanted to be mad, but couldn't. She looked at the Sheriff. "Deputies Miller and Bordeaux are assigned to your evidence technology division, correct?"

He nodded, and continued Kathy's thought, but was speaking to Jason. "They wouldn't be part of the manhunt; they could both go with Kathy and Dr. Lacompte. It will also give them a chance to check out some of the background of the case, and the cave area where you found the arrowheads."

Jason folded his arms. "It's a sinkhole, not a cave."

Kathy hugged his arm, "It will be all right. No one would try to hurt us if we are all together. And, if there are any more poisonous packages at the house the deputies can take care of them." She leaned up on her tip-toes, and whispered in his ear. "Besides, Dark Lady said the house was safe for me. And so far, that seems to be the only thing that has checked out. I am the only one who hasn't had a problem at the house." She backed off. "I am sure the deputies can drive us, and bring us back." He loosened up and put his arm around her waist, kissing the top of her head.

Deputy Miller nodded, "Yes, we would need our equipment in case we did find something. It would be best if we drove."

"We'll keep them both safe," Deputy Bordeaux said, nodding and pointing to Dr. Lacompte and Kathy.

Jason glanced at Dr. Lacompte. He whispered back into Kathy's ear. "Please be careful, let the deputies check everything first."

"We will all be very careful." She kissed his cheek and headed for the door. "Coming?" she said motioning the deputies to follow her.

Kathy sat next to Dr. Lacompte in the car. She smiled at Kathy. "From your briefing it sounds like you have done quite a bit of research into the Caine Plantation."

"I accidentally found it. I had flagged a search engine for Caine Plantation and was a bit shocked to find a hit on it from within the agency. I am actually assigned to Midwest, Ohio, but when I read Dr. Newsome's report, and his request for a transfer off the case, I requested it. I didn't know about Milton Lawrence, or the attempt on your life until I arrived here yesterday afternoon was briefed by Sheriff Rainier. I was just interested in the Marissa Caine death."

Kathy nodded. "How long have you personally been following the Caine's?"

"Not really at all. I only have family stories. My grandmother scanned and emailed me copies of the family journals. I have only been digging a few days."

Kathy smiled and pulled out her tablet. "Here, let me transfer a folder of my best research to you. This should help catch you faster than sifting on your own."

"Oh that would be fantastic." Sylvia pulled out her tablet and they exchanged data.

A few minutes later they pulled up the driveway and parked directly in front. The yard looked fantastic. Nori and Chuck were yard masters! Kathy couldn't be more pleased with their work, odd as they were. The trees were trimmed, and the new bushes and sod were very rich looking.

Deputy Miller was impressed. "Wow! This doesn't even look like the same place."

"It's all curb appeal, trust me, you'll see in just a minute."

They got out, and walked up the steps. "The library is where the cyanide and suicide note of Marissa Caine was found." Kathy used her new skeleton key to open the door. As soon as they walked in Sylvia stopped and stared at the staircase.

"It that her?" Sylvia pointed.

"I don't see ghosts." Kathy said, looking up the stairs where Sylvia was pointing.

"Hello." Sylvia said, continuing to look up the stairs. "I am..."

There was a pause. Both deputies crossed their arms. "We aren't giving you any money, for this so-called psychic reading."

Sylvia frowned at Deputy Miller, and then took a breath in. "She's kind of a bitch, isn't she? Told me to 'hush'. She says, for you to stay in the house. That she can protect you from the Angry One."

"What does the Angry One look like? Is there two?"

There was a pause. "One is descendant spawn of the Blanc rape of Percy's daughter. She isn't the Angry One, but she helps the Angry One. Tells her what to do, just like William used to do to teach Percy. The Angry One is consumed with hatred of you. She talks like a Yankee. She ran into the door frame knocking herself unconscious trying to get away from Dark Lady."

"New York. Carrie Bell is from New York. You can't get any more Yankee than that."

"She will not enter the house again. Apparently she passed out and when she came to, Dark Lady frightened her so badly that she knocked herself unconscious again, trying to leave."

Deputy Miller frowned, "I think you hit your head. Can I take you for a

CAT scan?"

"Dark Lady," Kathy said, feeling like she was talking to air. "Jason and I have proof you didn't kill Marissa. The truth will be known. Everyone will know the good you and Marissa working to do. Percy, William, the Blanc's will also be known for the magnitude of evil they did. The Caine fortune will go to helping people in a foundation I am setting up. You must let people I have invited into the house, without scaring them."

There was a pause.

"She said, thank you for restoring her beautiful wallpaper. When you did, she knew you had a kind soul. She will be with you until the baby is born, and then she faded away into a black fog. You really couldn't see that?"

Kathy shook her head, "Well, I suppose I should show you the library. I tossed out the legal books, but the remaining Caine collection is still there."

Deputy Miller folded his arms in tighter, "You don't believe that?" Deputy Bordeaux nodded in agreement. He wasn't buying it either.

Kathy shrugged. "Three months ago, no, I wouldn't have. Since then, quite a lot has happened. Come on, it's upstairs, this way." She led them upstairs. "Besides, I was here when Dr. Newsome was. I saw his reaction. He was terrified. He was talking and reacting to someone we could not see. So honestly, I no longer know what I believe; with one exception...I can't see or talk to ghosts. And, if Carrie Bell knocked her bulldog, bitch-face, self-unconscious, that is hilarious." She led them up into the library.

"My great-great grandfather and his son tried and tried to expose the Caine's, but the political environment favored them." She fanned her arms out to indicate that she was in the Caine's house. "Well, at least one Caine will be going to jail for her crimes."

Kathy pulled out the Shakespeare reader. "This one is definitely interesting. Even though it has Percy's name on it I think it belonged to Stable Boy." She explained there had been strange messages in it, but she left off the content specific to her.

She then showed them the brown quilt, and the message in the attic locker, before taking them to the sinkhole. Ultimately nothing new was found, but they seemed to appreciate to being able to visit the house and get more of the history. It was certainly more interesting than discussing personnel assignments to a search grid.

There was also no sign of any sort of intrusion. But, if what Dark Lady said was true, then Carrie most likely would not risk returning to the house. She needed to talk Jason into moving here.

They drove back to the station where Sylvia and Kathy exchanged contact information before she headed back to the lab with the deputies to concentrate on the case.

Kathy sat with Alan while Jason and the Sheriff discussed the manhunt in his office. She downloaded all the pictures of Carrie Bell from her Facebook page. She and Alan pulled together a wanted poster.

Alan smiled as he typed in the description. "Bull-dog Bitch-face is not an approved police description."

Kathy frowned. "5'6" 190lbs, Short, but curly blond hair. Hazel eyes, very stocky, more so than fat...she is muscular. I'll bet she can bench press 200 lbs."

Alan typed her description onto the poster.

She looked over at Lauren. She was lying on the steel bed staring at the wall. She smiled, feeling a sudden super mean streak for the woman who had just helped plot to kill her.

"Alan, you have kids right?"

"Three, but their adults now. I have six grandkids. Two of the grandkids graduate high school in two months." He smiled, pointing to the photos on his desk.

"When did your wife start showing?"

"About three or four months, I guess." And then he did the dirty work for Kathy. "How far along are you?"

"About a month, I guess it will still be some time before I start showing."

"You're pregnant! With Jason's baby!" Lauren burst into tears. "Bitch, you are living my life! Give it back. You don't get to keep it!"

"Did you hear something?" Kathy asked Alan.

Alan shrugged. "A quote that sounds remarkably familiar. Or, it could have been a mouse?"

She leaned over to Alan, "How did she miss that I'm pregnant. Almost everyone in town knows."

Alan shrugged again, "People don't want mice eating the cheese at their parties," he whispered, but used a loud hushed sounding voice that suggested it wasn't really meant to be hushed.

The door chimed as a local T.V. news crew out of New Orleans entered the station.

"May I help you?" Alan said, rolling his chair to be between Kathy and the desk.

"Chief Rose, please. I am Kate Lowe, with Local Five News. We were wondering if he would be willing to talk to us about the attempt on his wife's life. Is this her? Are you Mrs. Rose?"

Lauren started screaming again. "Knocked up Bitch stole my whole life! You should be dead! That's her, the red headed whore!" She reached through the bars pointing at Kathy. She looked crazy with her face pressed against the bars that hard.

"Let me guess? Suspect?" Kate asked, flipping her forefinger in Lauren's direction. She motioned the camera man to get Lauren's fit, but he was already filming it.

Kathy smiled at Kate, ignoring the screaming, "I am Kathy Rose," she said, pleasantly, like she was at a social gathering meeting people.

Jason came out. "What is going on out here?" He stopped and stared at

Kate. "Hello Ms. Lowe. The Sheriff and I will be making a joint statement soon. If you don't mind, could you please wait outside? We are waiting for Ms. Grayson's attorney to arrive. It shouldn't be long, we have to wait for him to finish up in court before he can speak with her." He glanced at Kathy, who was holding up a wanted poster. "Meanwhile, my wife has a wanted poster of the other suspect."

Kathy handed Kate a flyer. Kate thanked her. They went outside and started filming shots of Kate holding up the poster of Carrie Bell. Jason returned to his meeting.

Within twenty minutes Kathy could hear a commotion outside. She looked out the window. "Holy Cow! Alan!"

There were at least five more media satellite trucks outside. The commotion wasn't an incident, it was just the sound of a lot of people gathered close together. She watched them for a minute, they seemed so loud even though they really weren't doing anything but moving camera equipment around and raising satellite posts on their vans. She smiled.

"Something funny about someone putting a shark tank out front?" Alan asked, rolling in his office chair to look out the window.

"No," she shook her head still smiling. "I am just surprised at how quickly I came to love the quiet of this town. You would think I am used to the noise of a lot of people since it is all I have ever known."

"Well, we do have a certain Southern charm here."

"Yes, you certainly do."

"Should we let them know that someone has chummed the water for the media, so they don't walk out expecting only local media? Is that a CNN jacket on that one reporter?"

"I'll let them know." She got up and knocked on the door. "I am sorry to interrupt, but Ms. Lowe is no longer the only media here. There is quite a gathering." Her phone buzzed. It was Randy Bell. "It's Randy."

Jason pulled her into the room and shut the door. "Answer."

"Randy." Kathy said, trying to sound neutral as she tapped her phone.

There was a pause.

"I'm on CNN, right now. Why?"

Jason flipped the T.V. on, and then muted it. They were just wrapping up the story, and went to break with the cover photo being Lauren's screaming face pressed against the cell bars.

"My husband....shut up...How is that even relevant? Don't be a dick!"

There was a pause.

"Wait a minute. It was your wife who tried to kill me. I moved over nine hundred miles to get away from you, and the stink that follows you around. I didn't do anything to her, but if I see her in my scope, I'll blow that face of hers clean off the front half of her skull! How dare you ask me that! Where is she?" Kathy was nearly yelling.

"Kathy," Jason whispered, "calm down, please."

She took a deep breath. "What is going on with Carrie? Why would she come after me?" She could feel everyone's eyes on her.

She listened for a moment. She rolled her eyes, "Randy, you gambled and lost how much! That isn't my fault! It's your own stupid fault for being a gambling ass. Why would she blame me for that?...You did it to keep her from getting any of it in the divorce...Well...She should have planned better when she left you... Yes, it is very amusing that she will get half of nothing, however, you are aware that you will also get half of nothing?" Another long pause. "Sure, anything would be appreciated."

She hung up. "He doesn't know where she is." She pulled out her tablet and checked her email. "This is everything he has on her." She opened a file Randy just sent her.

There was a scanned front cover of Lauren's book, a web-link to the town museum, and a saved link for MapQuest with a red-line to what appeared to lead to Kathy's house. He sent another email stating she took his car, and \$5000 he had hid in the air vent. He also requested she retrieve

the remainder of it.

She snorted, "Like I am going to do that."

There was a knock on the door. It was Alan. "I think you should see the media situation. They are claiming the ghosts of the old Caine Plantation are stalking another Mistress of the House."

"Tell them I'll be out in five minutes. Make sure they aren't blocking my roads, call for back up clearing the road if you need to," Jason said. "You stay in here. Just in case she's in the crowd. It isn't just you she is trying to take away from me. She is trying to take my whole family."

Kathy nodded. She knew Jason was right. She couldn't expose herself, and thus expose the baby to danger. "I'll check the news from right here." She pointed to the T.V. with one hand and held up her tablet with the other. She also had Sheriff Rainer's and Dr. Lacompte's information to review. She had plenty to keep herself entertained.

"Thank you, for not arguing," he said, squeezing her hand.

She smiled and nodded, squeezing back.

She sat down at an empty seat while they quickly reviewed what they were going to say to the press, what they were going to keep quiet, and then went out to make a joint statement.

Kathy turned on the T.V. feeling alone and small in the now empty space. She pulled over her tablet and opened the files on the flash drive the Sheriff had given her. Hattie had been Marissa's contact at the Blanc Plantation, since not one of the Blanc's would 'go against their own interest.'

Kathy smiled, this was a treasure trove of history. Sandy at the museum would have a stroke on purpose to get her hands on this. She couldn't wait to devote some more attention to it. The idea of putting it together in a book was becoming more and more appealing.

She closed the folder and opened a few of the folders that Dr. Lacompte had given her. Robert Lacompte had been covering for Marissa.

He wrote the Caine puff-pieces to make it easier for Marissa to make the necessary connections to run the slaves north. If she was a media darling, then everyone would try to ride on her coat tails of social charm. The odd little blurb regarding Percy's arrest, had been a signal that the operation was over; for the foreseeable future. It had taken Lacompte almost a year to find another plantation to help. It was Percy's real arrest that lead Lacompte to start digging into Percy's other trafficking business that was when the true horror of what Percy was up to came to light. The problem was that Lacompte couldn't prove or disprove anything about...anything. Not the slave's whereabouts, not Marissa's death, or Dark Lady's involvement. Although he did note that he didn't believe Dark Lady would have killed Marissa, because it would hurt the slaves trying to escape. Dark Lady was feisty, but she would die, and did die, before she would act in a way that would harm their ability to escape. She was also very patient, and never acted on impulse. Lacompte thought Dark Lady reminded him of the librarian from when he attended university. She would help you, but wasn't afraid to tell you to get out if you whispered too loud.

Kathy grinned and nodded. That profile met with what everyone had said about their encounter with the ghost. The guest room could be a tribute to her, the dirty attic space was simply not the place to showcase Dark Lady's story. Although it could be restored and she would more seriously consider putting it on the tour.

The report ran on the news again, about her being the target of a murderer seeking revenge for her husband being terminated from his job. It also highlighted the fact that Lauren had been stalking Jason for years, and seemed to be pushed over the edge when she found out he had married Kathy.

She smirked, "Close enough, I suppose." She sighed, here comes the civil rights charges and law suits for Randy. Perhaps he was lucky to have gambled everything away? He wouldn't have anything left by the time ACLU was finished with him anyway.

She turned off the T.V. She wanted to focus on anything that didn't involve her being brutally murdered.

That evening Kathy cooked dinner for Jason while he showered. She was also watching the evening news. Now that she had calmed down a bit, she was curious of what they were saying.

"Chief Jason Rose's wife, Kathy Marconi-Rose, is a retired homicide detective from New York City. Apparently she is the ultimate target of the killer. It is unknown at this time why a Mr. Milton Lawrence was so horrifically murdered since he had no connection to Mrs. Rose. As mentioned at the five O'clock hour, Mr. Lawrence was murdered in the same manner as a Caine slave named Dark Lady had been nearly a hundred and sixty-five years ago." They showed a copy of Dark Lady's damage to property report, along with a new entry made by Jason changing the classification of the report.

The reporter continued. "In a joint statement released by Chief Rose and Sheriff Rainier, They have evidence that two suspects were involved in the plot on Mrs. Rose' life. One is in custody, Lauren Grayson. According to most locals, Miss. Grayson has stalked Chief Rose for more than twenty-five years, so the Sheriff's Department will be taking over the investigation along with a liaison from the State Attorney's Office. A diary found in the trash, by our street reporter, suggested that Miss. Grayson had killed a co-ed who falsely accused Chief Rose, then a college sophomore, of rape. The co-ed did admit to making a false report while she was intoxicated to cover up the fact that she tried to shoot at him. By the time the truth was uncovered Jason Rose had been asked to leave his college football team, and his scholarship revoked. Chief Rose cites the Co-ed's drinking problem as the reason he no longer wanted to date her. With a new clean record. He went to work almost immediately in law enforcement. After the break, we'll air the joint press conference in its entirety." They faded to black featuring the wanted poster of Carrie Bell.

Kathy sliced the potatoes during the break.

They showed Jason's press conference with Sheriff Rainier. Jason announced that they had evidence to believe that the murder of Mr. Lawrence was meant to cover up Kathy's murder; to make it look like part of the plantation's haunted history, of which Miss. Grayson has written a book about. He held up the wanted poster featuring Carrie Bell.

Kathy almost snorted, "I'll bet sales of her stupid book just shot through the roof. Well, I am sure her legal team could use the money. At least she won't drain the Public Defender's budget," She smiled. Jason looked so handsome on T.V.

The timer on the fryer tweeted that oil was hot enough. She dumped the thinly sliced potatoes in. She hoped he would like her homemade potato chips. She set the timer again, and then flipped her burgers on the little grill.

She walked over to the windows and shut the heavy drapes for the evening.

They both had bags packed. They would stay here tonight. Tomorrow morning she had a meeting with James at the bank. He had the final paperwork for her foundation. She needed to review it. Hopefully she could get started on her plan for domestic violence victims soon. She had dubbed it *Operation Escape*. Then as soon as that was wrapped up, she would head out to the plantation, and stay there.

She sat down on the couch. The folder of the Lawrence murder caught her eye. She pulled it over and opened the cover. She drew in a breath at the photo as she finally let it sink in.

"This was meant to be me," she said out loud, to no one in particular. She traced Milton's injuries with her finger, "It was supposed to be my face ripped open, my spinal cord exposed, my twitching bloody hands tied to the whipping post."

Suddenly she was overcome with emotion. She picked up a pillow, buried her face in it and began bawling. She sobbed until the timer went off for the chips. She also heard the shower stop running. She finished cooking and quickly set the plates. She washed her face with cold water hoping he wouldn't notice she had been crying. But, with as hard as she cried it would have to show in her eyes.

"Hey, that smells fantastic!" Jason walked out of the bathroom with his shorts on. Kathy smiled, he looked really good in shorts. His face fell. "What happen?" he hurried over to her, cradling her face. "Is everything OK?"

"I am sorry. It just all hit at once. She meant to torture me to death. Horribly, painfully..." her voice got smaller and smaller. As a homicide detective, she had always been the one looking in, not the one on the receiving end.

Jason held her close, and kissed the top of her head. "I will not let her hurt you. Perhaps we should go out of town? Go to meet your parents rather than them coming here."

She shook her head. "No, we need to go home. Our home. We will be safe there. And, my parents will love it. I can finally be what they wanted for me. Now that I have it, I don't know why I resisted so hard against it." She leaned up and kissed him.

He smiled, "If you hadn't, you wouldn't be the woman I wanted so badly." He kissed her neck and caressed the silkiness of her pajamas.

"Your dinner is getting cold. I made you homemade potato chips. I didn't have Cajun Spice, so I used Old Bay."

"It's okay. I like Creole seasoning." He popped a chip into his mouth. "Oh, you're going to make me fat."

She laughed and patted her stomach. "Not as fat as I'll be in eight months."

They enjoyed the rest of the evening without talking further of the stress surrounding their lives.

Kathy couldn't wait to get a garden started in a couple of months, although Jason pointed out that the baby would be bigger and she might not feel like digging in the dirt during the Louisiana summers with a larger baby bump. They weren't like New York summers.

Jason made a face. "You step outside and the humidity at ninety-eight degrees sucks your will to live. My sister's in-laws won't visit during the summer 'humidity festival' as they called it."

THE ANGRY ONE

In the morning Jason went to work, after Kathy made him breakfast. She had the meeting with James in two hours. She read over some of the literature he had given her about how foundations work, most of which she was already aware of. She couldn't wait to embark on this new career.

She was also more seriously considering a book about Dark Lady. Someone needed to set the record straight. Someone needed to out sell that horrid piece of Lauren's dribble, or at least make sure equal credit was given. She figured she would wait until things calmed down with Jason before collaborating with Dr. Lacompte on it. She wanted to make sure they could devote their full attention to it.

She waited for her decaf. coffee to brew. She couldn't stand the caffeine anymore. It gave her hideous heartburn. Early in the pregnancy or not, the baby was making his presence known. She thought back to that first night. They had such a good time together, before they woke up to...

Her eyes widened. Didn't Jason say that Stable Boy called him daddy? She dropped to her knees and spontaneously vomited on the kitchen floor. "Ethan," she whispered, unbuttoning her jeans. They were becoming intolerable, even though she wasn't showing yet. She stood up, grabbed a wet dishrag, and wiped her face. Tears ran down her cheeks as she realized there had not been a sign from Ethan since that night. It was like he was gone.

She kept her hand on her lower abdomen. Her other hand trembled as she pulled the ultrasound photo of the baby off the fridge. She had to see it,

had to know that the baby was human and not some hideous supernatural monster. What was she pregnant with? The photo didn't offer any comfort. It just looked like a little circle-bubble. The Doctor had said it looked normal for this early stage.

Nausea overcame her again, but luckily the garbage disposal was handy as she vomited. She hated vomiting.

"I have to stop thinking about this!" She ran the water over her face.

She put the photo out of sight, cleaned up the floor, and then took a shower. She had showered this morning with Jason, but she felt she needed to clean off again. This time she dressed in one of her maxi dresses.

She looked at her jeans. "Time to tuck you away for jersey dresses or yoga pants until I can wear maternity clothes." She folded them, and put them in the back of Jason's tiny closet. There was no sense in bringing them to the plantation with her right now. They could be moved to storage. It would be close to a year before they saw the light of day again. On second thought, maybe she would just give them to Goodwill. No sense in paying to store clothes that will out of fashion before she can wear them again.

She shook the thoughts from earlier out of her head. It was ridiculous, and she felt embarrassed to be in her own skin. Of course the baby was human. There was only one man she had been with, so there was only one way she could be pregnant! She willed herself to stop being hysterical, and slipped her flip flops on.

She decided to gather up her things, and head out to see James at the bank a bit early. The Sheriff had assigned a deputy to her for protection, so he drove her. He waited outside the bank.

James was excited to help Kathy finalize the drafts for the paperwork regarding her new foundation. The first thing she did was set up a scholarship trust for Louise Mathews' teen great-grandchildren. Kathy figured the plantation owed the Mathews family at least that much. She smiled thinking, *Piss-off Percy, but thanks for the gold. It spends today just as well as it did back then. I am sure Dark Lady's family appreciates the free education you worked so hard to earn the money for.* For good measure, she might leave some roses on his grave with a thank you note explaining the brilliant idea of

converting everything to gold and getting rid of the Confederate cash. After all, it had appreciated over the centuries the same it always had.

James insisted on a salary for Kathy. Kathy had initially objected. She had a pension and was also paid out of another fund she converted to provide monthly income. But James said it was proper, and convinced her that it wasn't taking blood money. It was payment for making sure the blood money was never used to abuse again, so she accepted a small salary. She would roll into an education fund for her own child.

Next they discussed converting the upstairs garage space into a rent free apartment. She figured staying at the police chief's house with his sniper wife would be as safe as one could get in a domestic violence situation. She could have panic-lines installed to the main house and to the police station, just in case they were needed. If one was going to free one's self from abuse then one must have the resources to do so. The foundation's main purpose was to provide those resources. Besides, everyone was terrified of Dark Lady, or Ridely the Whipper, no one would follow the victims onto the property. The only worrisome part was convincing the victims it was safe to stay.

She stifled a sigh, perhaps she would just find a safe house out of town, or even in Baton Rouge, or New Orleans. Somewhere where the abuser wouldn't think to look.

James placed the copies of the finalized paperwork for the foundation in an envelope. He put Kathy's proposals in another. Copies of both, would be mailed out to the new board members. The members consisted of Jason's Father, Perry, Milton's wife, Ellen, Louise Caine-Mathews' son, Joseph, James from the bank, the museum curator, Sandy Moore, with Kathy as the binding tie breaking vote, and James as the non-voting treasurer.

If they did one large project a year and three smaller ones, the foundation's investments would have time to replenish before another big expenditure. It would be a full time job for Kathy to manage it once they were two or three years into it. She smiled. She liked this career move. All she had to do was finally get free of the damn Bell situation, and her life would be perfect.

"How are the renovations?" he asked.

"The wallpaper is now fully completed. The dining room is underway. It will be mostly ready for the first board meeting next Monday evening. You know, it's amazing at how slow renovations go when the contractors are terrified to be there. At least the painters haven't had an issue, so I have fresh paint everywhere I wanted it." But then, the painters were Louise's grand-nephews. That was how Louise knew who she was before they were introduced. They seemed to be immune to the hauntings of the Caine Plantation, because they thought everyone was acting crazy about the ghost sightings. They hadn't so much as heard a board creak. It must be something in their blood that insulates them from the hauntings.

He smiled, "Well at least Lauren is out of your way. The house is properly yours with no strings. With the house and local Underground Railroad history of the area, have you thought about renting out a room bed and breakfast style? It would help fund the foundation, and could easily be sealed from the rest of the house if you wanted it to be. The library could have its private entrance with the secret stairs. You could also put it on the museum's new Black History Month Tour they are launching next year. Then you would only have to deal with it once a year. What about the attic? It could be restored as well."

Kathy was stunned, "Who be interested in experiencing sleeping in slaves' quarters? In the winter? It isn't as cold as New York, but it still gets cold at night."

"I think you would be surprised at the interest in staying in that attic. It is quite famous among many different circles."

"I don't know about that. I would have to see some research. Seems like an awfully emotional stay, for anyone, of any race, especially with...well, with all the legend around the place. Perhaps just restore it, and put it on the tour as a side trip?...To preserve the history." She would not have guests waking up with Dark Lady hovering over them, telling them they'll be whipped bloody if they don't get out of the house. She would be sued into nothingness.

"Well it would be an excellent side trip, if not a main attraction." James

said, trying not to sound disappointed. "I'll gather it up. I have already been asked about it by several people, and organizations. A fully restored Caine Plantation would be an enormous tourist draw for the whole town."

"Thank you for your help with the foundation. You and the family are coming to the fish fry-wedding reception, right? We are having a table with cake."

"Wouldn't miss it." He smiled.

They said their good-byes and the deputy drove her home to Jason's. She would miss living downtown because everything was within walking distance. Too bad she was stuck in a car right now, she could have used a good walk in the sunshine, and after all it was only four blocks.

She took out her tablet. Her parents would be arriving soon, so she needed to go make a list of things to buy for the guest room. First she needed to see what sort of, comfortable, beds were available in the 1800's so she could order a replica. She also wanted to call Sandy, the Curator, and get some further advice on restoring the attic and whether or not anyone would be interested in such a thing.

"Here we are, Mrs. Rose." The deputy stopped in front of the apartment and let Kathy out, being careful to stand with him in between her and the street. This would protect her from anything coming off the street.

She thought about correcting him to call her Kathy, but she liked being called Mrs. Rose. "Thanks Deputy Rayland."

He waited outside in the car. She climbed the stairs, for what would probably be the last time, to Jason's apartment. She went straight to the kitchen to make herself some lunch. She was starved, especially since she had lost her breakfast. She plopped her frozen lunch into the microwave.

She smiled and looked at her and Jason's simple wedding reception announcement for next weekend's fish fry. Everyone they knew, and wanted to be there would be there anyway. The food was already pre-arranged to what everyone attending would want, be it Creole, Cajun, or just plain burgers. The town loved their Chief of Police, so it seemed like the perfect compromise to allow everyone to attend who wanted to. The

only thing that had delayed them slightly was the wedding cake, or in this case *cakes*. They had opted for cupcakes, but the bakery had needed time to do it for the entire town.

She put her hand over her lower abdomen. All thoughts from earlier were gone from her mind. She hadn't really believed she was going to have a baby until she saw the ultrasound. She smiled again. It was nice to trade the town gossip name of Kissy-Rumor Girl for The Chief's Wife. Her parents had been right, they had just been wrong about whom to marry. What she felt for Jason was beyond anything she had felt for anyone. She had an immediate connection with him. That was why it was so easy to make love to him that soon in their relationship. She had never done that before, and on at least two occasions had to physically defend herself from the advances of her dates.

She refocused on their announcement. It directed anyone wanting to give a gift to make it out to the foundation's new domestic violence center account. There had already been over \$5000 donated to it, mostly from Jason's family, the bank, or the Mathew's family. Although she was sure she could talk her father into making a much larger donation once the relationship was rebuilt.

Her phone rang, "Hello Mom."

Her mother rattled on about the terrifying news that someone was trying to kill her daughter, sending a driver, and chartering a flight. She would be safe at their 45th floor penthouse. The doors had guards, they could hire more.

Kathy could hardly catch her breath, and she wasn't even the one talking.

She didn't get the chance to answer that she wanted to stay with Jason. There was breaking glass, and her coffee pot blew up. She screamed and ducked under the counter, dropping the phone. There was only one thing that noise could be, a gunshot. Someone had just shot at her!

She could hear her mother screaming for her on the line. "Kathleen! Kathleen!"

Snap out of it, Kathy, grab your phone! Get the rifle! She reached over and grabbed her phone.

"Mom...Mom...Listen, I love you too, but I need to call Jason." She hung up, dialing Jason's cell number instead of 911. Later she would have no idea of why she did that, or be able to explain it. Perhaps she felt safe with him, or perhaps she was trained to answer 911 calls, not dial them.

"Hello, Dodger," Jason's pleasant greeting seemed out of place to the chaos unfolding at his home.

"Jason!" She started bawling, and was embarrassed by this sudden display of emotion. "Someone just shot the coffee pot! And...and...broke the window." She couldn't bring herself to say someone had just shot at her!

Jason didn't answer her, but she could hear him talking on his radio. There was a distress tone coming over the police radio, and he ordered all units to his address.

She could hear Jason calling the deputy outside on the radio, but he didn't answer.

She low crawled into the bedroom, got her rifle, and moved over to the bedroom window. She leveled the scope, first to the deputy's car. The deputy was slumped over lying motionless; the tell-tale sign of blood spatter sprayed the interior of the car. She looked across the street. She could see the broken window. No one was in the empty apartment above the dress shop.

She picked up her phone, Jason was still on the line. "She was above the dress shop. The deputy is down. Start an ambulance. I think she is gone now." She scanned what she could with the rifle scope, trigger finger ready.

She saw Mike arrive. "Jason, I think she shot the deputy in the head from the same apartment she shot at me from." Kathy could hear the engine revving in his car with the siren in the background, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was on his way. She scanned the area again, "I can't see her now. Try out back."

Jason relayed the message, and Regina responded that she would take the back. Mike was headed, with another officer, up to the vacant apartment.

Three minutes later Jason burst in the door and grabbed Kathy holding her close. "I love you," he said, trying to avoid bursting into tears. He could have lost his wife and child! It would literally kill him if anything happened to them. "Here, let me help you put this away," he said, taking the rifle from her lap.

She nodded, moved to the living room, and flopped down on the couch, before bursting into tears.

He set the rifle in the corner, and knelt next to her. "Hey, hey," he said, gently patting her shoulder, and then pulling her closer.

"I just couldn't let Randy do it! I just couldn't let him send an innocent person back to jail for no reason. That poor guy had changed his whole life around. He was being 'normal' except for the fact that he was staying with her and allowing her to exact her pound of flesh with a baseball bat," she said continuing to sob as she rehashed the details of the incident with Randy.

"Hey, Hey," he patted her head, "Other than a 12 hour delay, you did nothing wrong. No one innocent went to jail, and even your Captain said there was no way the victim was going to prosecute his wife for beating him like that. It isn't your fault. You didn't ask to know those things about Randy. You aren't in charge of who he allowed himself to become."

"But someone innocent got hurt! Carrie was a stay-at-home wife and mother, without Randy's pension and assets she has less than nothing. She put up with his cheating, and his snide comments all for nothing. He called her Bulldog, and told her she had a fat face. I never once heard him tell her she was pretty. She isn't that bad looking. Then he gambled all the money away, for the sole purpose of keeping her from having any of it."

"Jesus, you aren't feeling sorry for her! Personally, I look forward to blowing her brains out! Or at the very least, beating that bulldog bitch face black and blue!"

"Why would she kill Lawrence? And, the poor deputy!" Kathy whined.

"I don't know, here," he said, laying her down the rest of the way on the couch, "You need to calm down. It isn't good for you or the baby." He laid his head on her chest. Her heartbeat was too much. He started crying at the thought of what he almost lost today. If Carrie was a better shot, he could have run up here to find his wife a bloody mess heaped on the floor; and the possibility of a baby, gone along with her.

His radio keyed; a sheriff's deputy with a tracking dog was arriving along with the ambulance.

"10-4," he blurted out. Kathy held him back.

Mike's voice came over the air, "The apartment's clear. She isn't in here. I am going to check the roof."

Both Kathy and Jason stiffened. Could Carrie see them from the roof? "You get down," he said, lifting her off the couch and putting her on the floor, below the line of fire.

Regina's excited voice was next, "We have a shooting victim down in the rear parking lot. Send the ambulance to the rear. She car-jacked a Black SUV. It was Tully's truck from the gun shop! Be advised, he was bringing a load back. Suspect is now armed with at least two assault rifles and several cases of ammunition."

His eyes widened. "Dispatch, call Tully and see if he has a GPS trace on that shipment." He doubted it. Tully was hard core anti-government, hopefully it didn't come back to bite them all in the ass, or more to the point, shoot him in the ass.

"10-4" she said. And then a few minutes later, confirmed Jason's assessment. "Negative on the GPS."

He sighed, "10-4"

It took several minutes for Kathy and Jason to calm down and recompose themselves. They drove to the police station, battling through all the media traffic to get into the station. Someone even smacked him the

head with a boom mike.

"That's one step too far!" He snapped at them. "Back off, right now!" He held up a grenade of tear gas.

"Sorry, Chief." They parted like the Red Sea for him to continue walking Kathy into the station.

Lauren had flipped her the bird as Jason cradled her by the shoulder into his office. She ignored her and leaned hard into Jason's embrace, as they entered his office. He had figured it would be safer. More and more Sheriff's deputies were arriving, as well as more prominent news media reporters. Kathy thought she recognized some reporters from CNN and Fox News.

She filled out the report, while he went across the street to grab her some lunch before the street turned into an even bigger media circus. She was starved, especially since she still had not eaten. She finished up her statement quickly. There really wasn't much to fill out. She was fixing lunch and the bitch...the suspect shot at her. That was pretty much all she knew. Actually, she only knew that she was shot at, she still had not seen Carrie Bell commit a crime with her own eyes. But, with Lauren still locked up, it obviously wasn't her.

Alan was manning his desk out front. He looked vigilant, although if Carrie had turned to sniper tactics poor Alan was just a target to practice on before Carrie reached her. But, Jason was probably right, there were too many cameras around for anyone to try anything. At least two of the cameras had live satellite feeds directly to the newsroom.

She put her hand over her abdomen. She had been deliberately not thinking about the baby. The thought of not being a mother to this baby was unbearable. She wanted this life, this baby, and to have Jason at her side. She wanted her family and her house. She wanted her parents to stop being stupid snobs and accept her.

She picked up her phone and was going to call her mother back, when she stopped. Her finger hovered over Randy's number. Did she really want, or need to talk to him again? He got what he earned. She did nothing to Carrie. He did. He did it all to her. And Kathy wasn't going to pay the price

for it. Did he have more information?

She dialed the number.

"What more could you possibly want from me!" Randy's angry voice came over the line.

"Your wife just tried to snipe me from across the street."

He smirked, "Stupid bitch never could fire a weapon."

"Really? I know you're angry with me, but do I deserve to be dead? Call her off! You did all this to her! I didn't do anything! You were the one who locked up an innocent, blew through your savings, both of you treating each other like shit! It was you who gave her crabs! Randy! Not me! Why is she coming after me, when you are the bane of each other's existence! I have a new husband and a baby on the way. I have a perfectly good life to live as Kathleen Rose, at least nine hundred miles away from you!"

His tone lightened considerably, "What do you want me to do? I didn't have any control over her when we were married; Hell, she wouldn't even listen to good advice."

"What's her phone number?" She felt stupid that she hadn't asked for it already.

"I'll text it. Once you get her let me know, so I can at least keep all the assets we have left and not split them with her." He hung up on her, but she didn't care.

One thing was for sure. Kathy could hunt people too, and she was sniper trained. This bitch had to be put down. She wasn't just going to sit here and be hunted. After lunch she was going to get her rifle, find Carrie Bell, and blow her brains out.

The text with the phone number came through.

She dialed the number, there was no answer. She picked up Jason's office line and dialed the number again. There was a pickup and a hang up, and then a text to Kathy's phone.

"You aren't allowed to keep everything you took from me, and now I know where you are."

She texted back, "Randy took it. He did what he did. It was all him."

"No Code Blue for you, you knocked up whore. I am going to shoot you low first, so you'll know the baby is lost. They won't even be able to keep you in a coma to keep the baby alive."

"Why did you kill Milton Lawrence?" Kathy texted back, ignoring the personal taunt.

"I had been watching them, to make sure that was the house with the calls to the police to check in the closet for the ghosts. Lauren told me about it. She seems to think you shouldn't be able to keep what you have taken from her either. She said, after I whipped you to death in the garage I should leave the bloody whip there in the closet in the little girl's closet. The police would find it the next time the girl called."

Jesus, she really had planned this out. Not just to torture me to death, but to really stage it to look like a ghost was involved! The lunatic! "Why did you go there before you were ready?"

"To hide, and eat. He came home early to romance his trophy whore! He punched my face. Screamed at me to leave, said he was calling the police. I couldn't blow my cover to kill you, so I had to use the whip on him, since it was all I had. I had to go back and get the whipping post and tie him to it. The dick was still alive. It took forty-five minutes for him to finally die."

Kathy closed her eyes, poor Milton was a mistake! He was nothing but in the way, but that still didn't explain his YouTube video. Dark Lady must have somehow known, and tried to warn him. Tears ran down her face.

She texted Carrie, "Turn yourself in."

"After I kill you and destroy that brat you're gestating, Good-bye. I am destroying this phone."

There were no more texts.

"Hey, are you okay," Jason asked, coming in with her lunch. He set it down on his desk, and held her close, cradling her head. It made them both feel safe and loved.

Kathy quickly wiped her face. "Thank you. I was hungry. I had a terrible bout with morning sickness this morning," she said. She handed him her phone "Carrie texted me."

"Really." He read over the texts while she ate. "God, poor Milton was killed because he was hoping for a nooner with his wife."

She finished her gumbo and rounded the desk to kiss him.

He smiled, "Gumbo." He kissed her neck and held her close by the waist.

"I love you. I can't wait until I can introduce you to my parents. They are really going to like you," she said, kissing his neck. Too bad the gumbo didn't come with a mint. It was not a good kissing food, unless the other person was eating it to.

There was a crash of breaking glass, and a few seconds later popping sounds, along with more breaking glass. She could feel Jason pulling her down behind his heavy oak desk. She realized in horror that he wasn't pulling her to safety, he was falling down. He just happened to be taking her with him. He pulled her under him, and covered her with his body. He said nothing, he just groaned, a terrible painful groan. He put his hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming.

"Don't speak." His voice was barely a whisper, and strained. "Let her think she got you, lay still. Don't risk the baby. Do you understand...Do not risk the baby."

She nodded, and did as she was told. She closed her eyes as another hail of bullets came crashing into anything and everything around them. The lunatic, thankfully, couldn't shoot.

"You don't get to keep it!" Carrie's deranged voice screeched, and then she released another round of bullets. "Same for you bitches out here! You like my new truck!"

Kathy could hear the magazine run dry, and then heard the final click indicating that Carrie was out of ammo. She reached for Jason's gun on his belt. He hadn't moved, and was terrifyingly still.

"Don't move," Jason whispered. This time he sounded stern. "You don't know if she has another weapon. I'll do it. My life insurance is already switched to you. Please, just take care of the baby."

Tears ran down her face. She could feel his bullet resistant vest against her. Why hadn't she considered that? Had Carrie missed him? "Are you alright?" she whispered.

He nodded as he un-holstered his weapon. "That's going to leave a bruise. I am just glad this ugly brick of a desk was in the way. I'll never complain about it again." His voice was full of strain.

He got up and crouched by the edge of his desk, peeking around the edge. He stood up. "She's gone."

He helped Kathy up. They looked around. "You're going to need some new blinds for your office." She was in shock. Carrie had rammed the reporters and the building with the stolen SUV.

"Alan!" Jason ran out to the Sergeant's Desk. He took out his radio. "Officer down! I need an ambulance now! At headquarters! Make that two! We have a prisoner down. Notify the Sheriff's office and the State Police, we need back up, now! Carrie Bell just shot up the police station and the media outside with an assault rifle. There are civilians down outside. I don't know how many."

"Alan!" Kathy said, running over to him, but it was obvious he was dead. He had not been wearing his vest, but it would not have mattered. She could hear the reporters outside yelling and screaming, several of them had been shot. "Alan! No!" And then she turned and saw the back of Jason. "Jason! No!" He must be running on adrenaline. He doesn't yet realize how badly he is injured.

Jason turned to Kathy, "Just stay down!" he ran out into the street. He

picked up the mic of his handheld radio, "She stole my car!" He looked around, several people from the media were still screaming, others were still filming. "Suspect is armed with an assault rifle, and driving unit one! Repeat, she is in a marked patrol car! Pull the GPS on it. Put out an emergency broadcast alert to not stop if pulled over by any of our officers until that car is recovered. The shotgun is loaded in the locked rack." The reporters swarmed him. They would no doubt long beat the dispatcher in getting that alert out.

He heard their news feeds interrupted with the Emergency Broadcast. He was impressed, the T.V. media didn't waste time in making that official!

A woman's voice came back over the air, "Yes, but you kindly left the key on the ring. Thanks for the reload, Chief." The air went dead.

"Dispatch, GPS on my unit, now." It was getting harder to talk.

"Jason!" Kathy screamed at him, but he ignored her. She couldn't get through the reporters who seemed to be holding her back. Several were sticking microphones in her face.

"Got it," the county dispatcher's voice came over the air. There was an alert tone, "All units, unit one is headed north toward I-55 at a high rate of speed. There is an armed homicide suspect driving. Female, short blond hair; she has fired on officers, and was last seen armed with an assault rifle."

"She has shot two! And possibly killed one! We have civilians down at the scene too. She ran over some of them with Tully's SUV. Where are my ambulances?" He was getting lightheaded.

"Medic 3 we're en-route," the paramedic's voice came over the air.

Several units from the Sheriff's office and the next town were also responding, as well as two nearby state troopers. Baton Rouge also had a chopper en route, but it would be about ten minutes before they arrived.

Jason could hear the sirens coming, everything sounded so far away. *Damnit! She is hearing all these units respond!* "All units, switch to Sheriff Two, Sheriff Two! Dispatch monitor both channels."

"10-4."

The air went almost dead as the dispatcher moved everything to the Sheriff's private vice raid channel that was for keeping raid teams silent as they approached scenes; meaning there was no chatter on the main air.

Jason was about to change his channel when Carrie's voice came over the air, "I am going to pull over the car driving in front of me, and take his car. It's more non-descript than yours is, and doesn't have a GPS."

"Carrie, please let them go. Don't hurt them. Dispatch, patch through the new camera feed from my dashboard camera. Can you see what type of car she is pulling over?" Jason said, keeping his voice calm and steady. He could hear Kathy screaming behind him. What was she still yelling about? He also noticed the reporters weren't in his face. They were surrounding him, but keeping their distance. Something was wrong.

The dispatcher came back, "No, Chief, I tied that already. The camera went black when she took the car. She must have pulled the...Unit 6 is approaching her!" The dispatcher's signal died.

Jason changed his channel over. Unit 6 was Mike.

He heard Mike's voice came over the air, "I am almost on her." The siren and engine revving in the background.

Jesus why did I get Mike, a father of soon-to-be four into law enforcement! Jason was doing his best to stop his reeling as the ambulance arrived. Mike had been on the force longer, but it was Jason who talked into applying in the first place. "In town like widdle, we have a prisoner down. She is gussin so be careful a'fore you follow her," What the hell did he just say!

One of the medics nodded for his partner to go check on Alan and Kathy. "Chief, why don't you sit down."

"Kathy..."

The medic cut Jason off. "Chief, Kathy needs you to do as I say, especially if you are going to be around for your little one. Please sit down right here," the medic said, easing Jason down, and then opening his bag,

pulling out a trauma dressing used for bleeding. Did he need that?

The adrenaline was running out. The stinging pain in Jason's back was beginning to take over. He laid down. He looked to the side and saw the blood on the pavement; not Alan's, not the poor reporter's, his! *Oh crap!* He thought as his eyes rolled back into his head. *Bullet resistant, not bullet proof.* All ballistic vests carried that warning, meaning, it wouldn't stop all caliber bullets, and Carrie had used a high powered assault rifle.

"Is he dying?" A reporter asked the medic. Her camera man filming over her shoulder.

"Back off, right now!" The medic ordered, and then he gently shook Jason's shoulder, "Chief! Jason! Stay with us. You have got to see that baby you have been waiting on all these years, be born." He picked up his radio, "Is the Trauma Center's Chopper available? If so, we need that chopper out here right now."

"Trauma-Flight en-route, ETA ten minutes."

The medic stood up, "Clear the street for Trauma-Flight!" He ran over to the ambulance and pulled out an oxygen treatment bag and another bleeding control kit.

"Move it, People now! Back up, stay West" He heard Sheriff Rainier say. "Dispatch, I need at least three more units here. We have a crowd control issue. All local law enforcement at headquarters is down at the scene."

It was the last thing Jason heard before losing consciousness.

"Jason!" Kathy screamed and started to run over to him, but was stopped by the other medic.

"The Sheriff said you're pregnant. Come with me, we need to get you in the back of the ambulance so I can check you out without the media filming it."

It sounded so logical, but wild elephants couldn't drag her away from Jason right now. "Jason!" She pulled forward on the medic's hand, waited to

feel him resisting her, and then snapped back, knocking him to the ground.

"Mrs. Rose!" The medic jumped to his feet. "Kathy! Please. Mitchell will take the best care of Jason. They are old football buddies, he won't let anything happen."

She walked toward Jason.

He ran up behind Kathy and picked her up, carrying her to the ambulance. "Get in, they are watching, and filming."

It seemed like five hundred cameras were pointed at her. Kathy sat down on the stretcher while the medic closed the door, and took her vital signs in private.

"With Alan and Jason down only the Sheriff is here. What if Lauren escapes?"

"I think all of the deputies from every surrounding Parrish are en-route. And, Ms. Grayson took a bullet to the head, and several to her torso. She isn't running anywhere of her own accord."

"Alan?" She already knew the answer. She had never, in all her experience, seen anyone with that fixed stare on their face who lived.

The medic shook his head. "Try to concentrate on relaxing, if you can. This will help keep the baby safe." He went back to checking her vital signs. "Come on, breathe, all the way in, all the way out."

She did as she was told. Jason had just risked everything for her ability to keep the baby safe. She wasn't going to disappoint him. A few minutes later, she heard the chopper land, but concentrated on trying to calm down. She would do as she was told. She would keep the baby safe.

There was a knock on the door a few minutes later. It was one of the Trauma-Flight medics. "Can we borrow Mrs. Rose? And I think the other ambulance crew wants to borrow your stretcher. We have five civilians down, one is dead, the other four will be going with the ground units. Chief Rose and one of the camera crew who is down is coming with us."

"Here is her initial vital signs." He handed the pilot the report.

She got out and followed the pilot/medic to the helicopter. She looked over at Jason. He looked so pale, and unresponsive. There wasn't even a flutter in his eyelids.

"Jason," she whimpered.

"Here you go," the pilot opened the front seat door and motioned for her to sit. The trauma surgeon and nurse were still treating Jason. The camera man was already loaded. He didn't look good. He had been run over when Carrie crashed through the reporters and into the building.

The pilot strapped Kathy in, and then helped the doctor and nurse get Jason loaded.

Kathy knew it wasn't a long flight to New Orleans, but it seemed to take forever. They were met on the hospital roof by a trauma team of about fifteen people, two of which seemed to be assigned to '*handling*' Kathy. It was getting annoying, but she couldn't blame them after she knocked down the medic at the scene.

"If I can't go in, then why did they bring me!" She knew why, but refused to believe it applied to her. She was there as the next of kin, meaning she was the only one who could call-off the efforts to save Jason's life, or '*pull the plug*' as they said behind the scenes. It didn't seem so flippant now that it was her new husband and father of her child who was the one '*plugged in*'.

"We feared for the baby's life," one of the doctors said, running alongside the stretcher. "I'll assess him, and find you with some options."

She covered her mouth and nodded.

"Can I get you something to eat, it might be a while before we know anything," The burley male nurse asked.

Kathy nodded. The other medic must have reported that she knocked him down to get to Jason, so the hospital assigned the Son of Sasquatch to guard her. He walked her to a little room for the waiting families off the main trauma center. He ordered her a lunch tray, and then waited outside the door. She inhaled the food like a starved person, even though she had

just ate an hour ago. She sat there alone in the little waiting room feeling small, and helpless.

Three hours later, Jason's parents came rushing in. "How is he!" His mother shrieked.

She shrugged, and then burst into tears. "It's all my fault. She came here to kill me, not him. I should be the one in there. He pulled me under him, used his body and that desk he hates to stop me from being hit. It should have been me. Stupid bitch shot everyone, except the person she came for!"

"Oh no!" Janet said, stepping over and holding Kathy. "No, don't think that. He loves you, and everyone can see you love him back. He wanted the baby and you safe. He would be crushed if anything happened to either of you."

"It's his stupid rescuers' mentality!" Mike said, from behind her. "He always ends up surrounded by..."

Kathy let go of Janet, and stood there looking like Mike had just pointed a gun at her. She finished his thought for him. "Surrounded by bottomless pits of need! Psycho-stalker bitches! Women who bring him down, who ruin his whole life!" She had no idea why she was suddenly screaming at Mike.

"Michael Henry Rose, you hush! Right now!" Janet said, spinning around and pointing in his face.

He looked stunned, "I didn't mean Kathy. I meant Lauren, planning this whole..."

Kathy walked out of the room. Mike was behind her. "Kathy! I didn't mea..." She bolted for the elevators and hit the 'close door' button when he was about five steps from the doors. She pressed the first floor. The doors opened, and she walked outside to the patient drop off area. She was about to steal a car, go home, get her rifle, and hunt Carrie Bell down like the animal she was. Suddenly there were two strong arms around her dragging her back inside the hospital.

"Kathy, I didn't mean you. He loves you, more than anyone I have ever

seen him with." It was Mike pulling her into a small private consult room near the entrance. He shut the door and pulled the blinds.

"What could you possibly want?" she asked in a deadpan tone. "I need to go home, get my rifle, and hold up in the attic. Eventually that bitch will show up there, because that is where I am. When she does. BANG! Lights-out! Or shall I say, I'll ring her bell! No, I won't...She won't have a bell left to ring when I am done with her! Personally, I can't wait to see how the new face lift by Remington looks on her."

"Kathy," he said, trying to remain calm.

"I can hunt too. If I can see her in my crosshairs, she is done. I am going to walk over to her body, look at the inside of her bulldog skull, and piss in it; and then I'll turn around and show her what I really can't keep and drop it in the center of her skull!"

"Kathy! He has been my family a lot longer than he has been yours. I need you to return upstairs with me, so some decisions can be made. Decisions that only his legal next of kin can make. In case you missed the whole wedding thing, his legal next of kin aren't my parents anymore. It's his wife."

"Shut up." She pointed in his face. "She will come to my house eventually, and I am going to blow that fat face of hers off the front of her skull!" She pulled out her phone and dialed Phil. "Phil! I need you to come and get me so you can talk to Dark..."

Mike took the phone. "Phil, I am sorry to bother you...Oh, you heard. I guess everyone has by now. I am sorry. I have to go. Kathy isn't handling this well." He put the phone in his pocket. "I need you to return with me, now! Some decisions have to be made. Do you understand?"

"What decisions?" She stared at him blankly.

"The doctors will want to know about the extent of life support you think he would want."

"Life support?"

"Yes, Kathy, snap out of it!" He yelled, shaking her. "You can hide in the Bell-Tower and wait to snipe Carrie later. Hell, I'll drive you myself! Right now, your husband needs you. Mom and Dad need you. I need you. Your family, the one that wants you! Needs you! Stop acting crazy and come back with me...Right Now!"

"Life support!" She burst into tears. "Life support! Jason, no! Not my Jason!"

He held her a moment and then led her back upstairs where she approved several avenues of treatment the doctors presented, if they were able to stabilize Jason soon.

Early the next morning Kathy's legs ached and her butt was numb from sitting in a plastic chair so she could see in the window of Jason's room. She nibbled on a protein bar. No one was allowed in right now, only the doctors and nurses. She was alone for the morning. Jason's family wasn't going to come until regular visiting hours. She still couldn't believe that she had run out like that yesterday. What had she been thinking? Nothing that was the problem. Carrie had won. Kathy didn't really have a rational thought after Jason went down yesterday. She had manhandled a paramedic, ran away from Jason, and her new family. She was acting like a raving lunatic. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall with her arms folded.

"You know there is a hotel very close to here. As his next of kin, the visiting hours don't apply to you. You can come and go as you please. You shouldn't be sitting like that for hours on end in your condition," One of Jason's doctors came over to her.

"Can I help you doctor?" She was in no mood to be lectured.

"In here."

Kathy cringed as he led her to one of the little rooms off to the side. The same type she used to sit in and talk to the family members of homicide victims, while she was telling them their loved one was dead, and started asking them awkward questions. She followed him in.

He motioned for her to sit, and closed the door. "First, your ultrasound and blood work look fine. The baby is fine, none the worse for wear."

She gave no reaction, "And Jason."

"Still touch and go. As you know, he lost a lot of blood. It was lucky that the chopper pilot had been monitoring the radio chatter. He had started that way when he heard civilians were down at the scene. I think that *saved* fifteen minutes saved your husband's life."

She nodded. "How is the life support now?"

"The only thing keeping him alive at the moment. He is still in a coma. But, he is strong, and according to everyone has every reason to fight through this."

"When can I go in?"

"Probably later this afternoon. I'll know more after I examine him. The good news is that there is no brain injury and he didn't suffer a loss of oxygen, it was a miracle that he managed to stay awake until the medics could take over breathing for him. Right now, I am more worried about you. If you keep this up, you could cause yourself to miscarry."

She paused, isn't that what Carrie said she wanted for her. "I'll do better." There was no way Carrie was *'taking'* this baby from her. She was *keeping* it

"You need a good rest."

"I'll go right now, and get a room, and come back with his family. I can't lose the baby that Jason just sacrificed himself for."

The doctor nodded.

She started downstairs and then stopped. What if Carrie was out there, waiting to blow her away while she was unarmed! She scolded herself, and then continued out the door. *You will not live in fear.*

She checked in, bought fresh clothes in the gift shop, breakfast, and then went to bed, intending to take a nap for a couple of hours. It was dark

when she woke up. She looked at the clock it was 1a.m.

She bolted upright. "1 A.M.! I slept eighteen hours!" her stomach rumbled. She was starved. She got dressed and went down to the lobby to see if there was vending machines with something that could hold her over. She was met by reporters.

"Hey! That looks like Kathy Rose, right there!" one of them said, swinging his camera to meet her. Another was snapping a photo. More flashes, followed by two officers approaching her.

"Kathleen Rose?" one of them asked.

Everything seemed so distant. "What is going on?" Her own voice sounded hollow in her head.

"You were reported missing and in danger," One of the officers stepped forward to take her arm. "Are you alright?"

"What? I told the doctor I was coming here. The clerk who checked me in knew I was here. I used my credit card at the gift shop." She felt faint. She was too hungry. She was too overwhelmed. She was going down. The last thing she remembered was hitting the hard badge on the officer's chest with her face as he caught her.

She spent the next two days next to Jason under observation, being fed copious amounts of food. Everyone was furious with her for not answering her phone. She had argued that it was Mike who kept her phone in the first stupid place! Janet had carried on about her being just like Jason, before bursting into a hysterical state of bawling.

The baby was fine. The doctor gave her a new prescription for her prenatal vitamins, along with a strict warning not to forget that a third person was involved with this situation.

Apparently, the doctors had changed shifts, as had the hotel clerks. They still would not have been able to find her because the clerk wrote down Karen Marcus, completely butchering her entire name. Still it galled her that they were upset with her, over some clerk who couldn't write Marconi, and a brother-in-law who took her phone.

She finished her breakfast, and looked over at Jason.

There had been no change in Jason's condition. She knew soon, they would come and ask her the dreaded, '*continued life support*' question, but for now, despite the coma, he seemed to be normal and healing as the doctors expected.

She was feeling better, except her mother was due to arrive in about four hours. Her mother had also yelled at her, through the phone, before also bawling hysterically. Her mother would no doubt start in on Mike as soon as she arrived. So much for a peaceful, joyful introduction between the in-laws at what was supposed to be a fun low-key reception.

"Kathleen Rose?" An orderly entered with a wheelchair.

"Yes," she said, setting her tray aside.

"I am supposed to take you for some tests."

"Okay." She got up and sat in the wheelchair.

They did another ultrasound, and some more blood work before releasing her...to sit in the same room, instead of having a bed.

She pulled out her tablet and began writing down Dark Lady's story. She needed a distraction. The first thing she needed to decide was this going to be a historical book, or should she use the history to inspire a Historical Underground Railroad crime novel. Robert Lacompte's notes would be very helpful in the area of inspiration for that.

Maybe she could do both?

She started typing.

Jacqueline Marconi arrived at the hospital. How could she have let Terrance alienate Kathy like that? She had missed all those years with her daughter, and now things were even worse.

"Hey Kathy, You are looking much better." A young man with dark hair

told her.

Her eyes widened. "Oh dear Kathy! Was she hurt too! I am her mother, Jacqueline. Can you take me to her?"

He stared at her, and then shook his head, yes. "I am Mike Rose. Jason's brother. I can take you to them, both." He led her to the elevator. She didn't say a word, she just followed him. "Um, hello. I guess we're family now. You look exactly like Kathy."

"You're the one who had her phone, and then panicked everyone when they couldn't reach her. Forgive me, but I wish to not spoil any meeting that we should have....at a much later date."

The doors closed. "Sorry about that. It was a really bad day. My brother was shot in the back by a raving lunatic."

She said nothing, and enjoyed the silence all the way to the Intensive Care Unit. She paused outside the door, and then went in. Kathy was typing in the corner, looking rather haggard. No wonder Mike had greeted her like that.

"Kitty Kat," she whispered.

Kathy nearly jumped out of her skin. "Mom!" she set her tablet and keyboard down, and ran over to Jacqueline bursting into tears.

"I have you Kat," she said holding Kathy tight. "I won't let go ever again."

"I should have listened to you. I should have come home. He also suggested we go visit you and dad. This wouldn't have..."

"Stop it. Janet said you were blaming yourself. Kathy you had nothing to do with this. I should have come down the instant you told me you had bought the house. Everyone knew you were just trying to get away...from something else that wasn't your fault. Well, there isn't time for this rehashing. This must be Jason." Jackie walked over to Jason's bedside. "He is handsome, isn't he?"

"Yes, and the best part is that he is just as handsome on the inside."

Kathy smiled, and then frowned before she started crying again. "I need him to come back to me."

Jackie held Kathy close. "I know, baby, I know."

Kathy's stomach rumbled. Jackie frowned at her. "The doctors said you were starving yourself. You passed out! Come, we're going to get a proper meal, now." She pulled Kathy by the arm. "I have a limo for the week."

They went to a restaurant and Kathy ate until she thought she would burst. "I didn't realize I was that hungry."

"You're pregnant. Your body needs the building blocks for my grandchild. And, as a Marconi, my grandchild will not be denied that which is needed."

Kathy smiled, "I miss you so much."

Jackie smiled too, "I missed you too. Now please tell me about Randy and this lunatic wife of his. And how is Jason's ex-officer involved? How do they even know each other?"

Kathy relayed the entire story. It sounded exasperating as she told it. Who would believe such a thing! Two people from different states, who don't know each other, conspiring to murder her. It certainly didn't fit any profile out there. "Dad has hired people hasn't he?"

"He would not want you to worry about what he is doing, but yes, he hired four retired Secret Service agents after you went missing. I am sure they close by somewhere. You concentrate on Jason, and keeping our grandchild safe."

Kathy nodded, apparently her parents were over the '*knocked up shock*,' and onto '*our grandchild*.' She decided to stick with main topic. "You know. I can't help but wonder, if poor Milton hadn't come home early that day, and the plan went as...planned...would I have been able to overcome Carrie? I have more training than her in hand to hand defensive tactics, and certainly more weapons training. Would Carrie be in jail right now, or would I be dead?" She smiled.

Jackie frowned, "Kathy that is very high on the list of things that I think is, not, funny."

"I am sorry mom, I just pictured poor Jason trying to convince people that Dark Lady or Ridely the Whipper didn't get me. You know...that the killer was real, and not a ghost."

Jackie shook her head. "Still, not amusing in the least."

She was still smiling, "That is why he decided to consult me, because one of his people actually suggested a ghost killed Milton Lawrence."

"Honey, you're pregnant, he did more than consult you. And, still, not funny. Must be that police humor-thing I keep hearing about."

"He didn't do anything I didn't expressly request. And at my age, I am thrilled about the baby." Then, Kathy allowed the conversation to shift to decorating/restoring the house as she pulled up all the photos on her tablet.

They finished the meal, upgraded Kathy's hotel room to one of the suites, and then they changed Kathy's license, before sending in for her new social security card. She was officially Kathleen Rose.

The next morning they attended Alan's funeral, and then Deputy Rayland's. The following day they went to the funeral of the reporter who had been killed at the scene by Carrie in the SUV. The cameraman was still alive, but Kathy had no idea how he was doing.

They were two, of only six people who attended Lauren's funeral. They didn't stay long, mostly to sign in and leave. Lauren's family was aware of her part in the conspiracy to kill Kathy.

"Why did we have to go there?" Jackie said still feeling odd.

"To make sure she was actually dead. I wanted to see her dead body with my own eyes. By the way, they did a good job fixing her hair to cover the bullet hole in her skull."

Jackie closed her eyes and shook her head. "Baby, you have to stop acting like this. You are allowing Carrie to win."

"I'll stop acting this way five minutes after I have given her my special Remington Sniper Rifle face lift."

"Kathleen! Please think of the baby. Did you and Jason discuss any names?" Jackie asked, figuring that changing the subject was probably a safer idea.

"Daniel for a boy, or Jackie's nice for a girl."

"Oh, I hope it's a girl!" she said excited. Kathy wanted to name her granddaughter after her.

Kathy smiled, and finally allowed any thoughts of blowing Carrie's brains out to leave her. They stayed away from the plantation just in case Carrie was there. Jackie figured she would see it sooner or later.

At the end of the week, she bid her mother good-bye, and settled in for the long wait. She was wondering when the doctors would finally push her to make some sort of decision regarding Jason's continued life support. The initial decision was easy, it had only been a few hours. She feared that the days had already become a week, and prayed they didn't become months. The decision regarding life support would become harder and harder. How long would he want her to drag it out?

She thought, as long as the doctors told her there was healthy brain activity, and so far, there was, she would drag it out. He would want the opportunity to see their baby.

Hopefully he would wake up on his own soon.

She picked up her tablet and read chapter one of *Operation Underground Railroad* to Jason. She thought that sounded like a good name for her book, but she would probably change the name several times. She also considered Dark Lady's 'catch phrase', *The Next Quilt is Red*.

She smiled and put her hand over her lower abdomen, it felt like soda was filling her stomach sometimes. She picked up Jason's hand "See, it feels like soda in there. The doctors say the baby is doing fine."

His hand twitched.

Kathy drew in a breath, "Jason, can you hear me, baby! We're fine, Honey, we both just need you to come back to us. I love you, and we need to start our life together." She pressed his hand firmly against her belly with one hand and caressed his face with the other, being careful to avoid the breathing tubes.

"Come on, baby, give me another twitch."

Jason opened his eyes and shut them again. They were just too heavy.

"Jason, wake up. I need you to come back to me."

That voice was familiar, then he remembered, it was his wife, Kathy. He tried harder to force his eyes open. It was a hospital room. He remembered he had been shot in the back. He wiggled his toes and fingers and tried to breathe a sigh of relief. It was hard to breathe, something was fighting him. He could move, but it was hard. He was so tired, and his throat was parched. He couldn't talk. He lifted his hand to his mouth and felt a tube. That was why it was hard to breathe. The breathing tubes were fighting against him.

Alarms started beeping on the machines.

"Jason! You're awake!" She leaned over to him. He could hear her pressing the call button for the nurses. She took his hand away from the tube, "They'll be here in a minute. Just relax. Here focus on this." She put his hand on her belly. "I was just telling you that it sometimes felt like soda pop in there."

He wanted to ask *'How long have I been out'*, but with the tube down his throat that was out of the question. He breathed in, and then relaxed allowing the tube to do its job. What he wanted to do was panic, and rip it out. He refocused and was thankful Kathy wasn't showing him a baby in a blanket. She wasn't showing, so maybe he hadn't been out that long. Still, it bothered him, how long had he been out?

"Hello, Welcome back!" The doctor said, smiling as he entered with a nurse.

Twenty minutes later Jason was leaning up in the bed, and letting teeny ice chips melt in mouth. He hoped he could talk in a minute, but so far his voice was not cooperating. Neither was his body for that matter. He felt so tired, and sore. The doctor and nurse were still hovering and checking vital signs, and then rechecking them.

"We're going to send him for some more tests, as soon as they have an opening downstairs." The doctor sent the nurse out to check on it.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, they left Jason and Kathy alone. He reached for her tablet, she handed it to him. He typed "How's the baby? How long have I been out?"

"About a week, and the baby is fine," she said smiling. "You just missed your mother. She sat with you while I rode with my mother to the airport.

He smiled and looked her up and down, and typed, "I love you. Any news on Carrie?"

Kathy leaned over and kissed his forehead. "I love you too," then she shook her head, no, "No word on Carrie."

He took a deep breath and tried talking, but it just wasn't going to happen. He breathed, and typed. "Alan! Jesus, Alan!"

She frowned. "Alan's funeral was earlier this week. Jason, it is just like the doctor said, you have been in a coma. You very nearly died." She hugged his hand to her face.

"A week?" He opened his eyes wide, typing. "I have been out a whole week. The city! The police force!"

"Calm down, the sheriff stepped up to help out, and he temporarily assigned three deputies to the town for the next month, or two, until things get smoothed over. By the way you're down an officer, one of your part timers quit after his wife threatened to leave him. Apparently it just now hit her that police work is dangerous."

He nodded, and relaxed, before stiffening again. "Lauren?" he made a face, as his voice resisted every syllable of her name.

Kathy shook her head, "She probably never knew what hit her." She pointed to her temple.

He nodded, unable to feel anything regarding Lauren's death except relief that he would never have to deal her again. He couldn't even feel bad about the fact that he felt that way.

"Here, I'll catch you up a bit." She pulled out the papers, and read the headlines. "*Hero Chief Saves Wife, and Unborn Child!*"; "*Sergeant Killed Saving Boss's Family.*"; "*Deranged Killer on the loose.*" The last one featured a nearly full size photograph of Carrie Bell, along with a hotline to call if anyone saw her. The forth paper featured Kathy's photo. "*An Interview with the Chief's Wife, Kathy Rose.*"

Jason did not feel like a hero, guilt was all he could manage. He wished they had chosen another title, such as '*Hero Sergeant Clears Way for Chief to Selfishly Save Own Family, and Damn the Civilians Outside.*' Although he was relieved to hear that Carrie couldn't work the key for the shotgun rack so his patrol car was recovered intact. However, Carrie had used the empty rifle she had stolen from the back of the SUV to frighten the couple out of their car.

He would need to work with the gun shop owner to some oversight on policies on Tully's deliveries, such as ammo not being delivered with the weapons. Perhaps after this incident Tully would be more receptive to accepting help from him, instead of constantly accusing him of being '*the man*' trying to take away his guns.

He glanced over Kathy's article. He decided to type his comment on her tablet rather than try to talk again. He was getting tired already, "This is your bio, and your findings on Dark Lady. Wow, the media really likes you, what a puff-piece. Par for course for the property owners of the Caine Plantation." He smiled.

"They were hounding me, terrible. I figured the best way to distract them was with the evidence clearing Dark Lady of murdering Marissa, and exposing Percy Caine for the horrible land-pirate he was. They ate it up, especially with the historical connection to Lauren and Carrie's plot. They simply forgot to ask me questions about you. I also figured you would want

to speak for your own jurisdiction."

He smiled, and typed, "I trust you, but thank you, for respecting that."

Yet another doctor came in a few minutes later and went over Jason's injuries and blood loss. He examined Jason head to toe, asking all sorts of annoying questions. After a few minutes, he ordered a dinner tray for Jason; rice pudding and Jell-O.

"When do you think I can be released?" he typed.

The doctor very successfully stifled a laugh, only the corners of his mouth momentarily upturned. "Let's attack that question in a few days, or perhaps a week."

Jason was stronger every day. The following Monday morning. He was holding down food and moving around on his own. Pain was still a factor, but he said it was less every day.

"It'll be tender for a while. Do not over do it." The doctor said.

Jason seemed agitated. "I've known Alan Saline for 25 years, worked with him for 18 years, and was his boss for 10 of those years. I have got to, at least, go visit his grave, talk to his wife, and make sure all the benefits kicked in like they were supposed to for an in-line of duty death," Jason said, almost pleading.

The doctor nodded. "I understand. Mitchell, your medic friend is going to assist you getting home. Don't push it though, overdoing it will put you right back in here. I am very leery about letting you go, especially with your two hour drive home, and back if something goes wrong. So...I am counting on that to keep you from acting foolish. I define foolish as trying to go back to work before you are medically cleared to do so."

"I'll keep him in check, and I am sure I can get Sheriff Rainer to help Jason with benefits verifications for his officers," Kathy said smiling, holding up some new pajamas for him to go home in.

The doctor smiled at her, "The paramedics said you were capable of

handling yourself. Keep him on a leash," he said, and then turned back to Jason, "I'll leave your wife to help you get dressed. The rest of your family is in the hallway."

Kathy nodded as the doctor left. She helped Jason get dressed.

"Ha! Men's medium, fits like a glove." He was surprised. He usually wore a large.

"You haven't eaten real food in at least two weeks," Kathy said smiling. He had lost at least twenty pounds, possibly more. "Luckily for you, I bought you an array of fashionable pajamas, from this decade. Don't worry, no cowboys or dinosaurs."

"Don't burst my bubble," he said smiling, "Hand me the cane."

"I don't think so," she said, grabbing the wheelchair. He frowned, but didn't offer an argument as she set the cane in next to him. She texted Mike and Mitchell that it was time to pull the car around. The doctor gave Jason an injection of morphine for the ride, so he slept the entire way home.

They arrived home to find the plantation under the guard of two State Troopers, who would remain to be their guards until the danger had passed. There was also a team that Kathy's father had hired. They were literally camped out at the edge of the bayou keeping an eye on the front and back of the house from tree stands. Jason's first instinct was to complain, but given what he and Kathy had been through over the last month, he just accepted the security precautions.

Mike and Mitchell helped Jason into bed, and went downstairs with his parents.

Kathy lay next to him on top of the covers. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know...still tired, I hate morphine...If we are going to live here, this room needs an update. The paint looks better though." He hated feeling so groggy and scattered. He would honestly rather hurt a little bit, than have his mind fogged.

"Yes, I have already been able to order some of the upgrades. The

bathroom is plumbed, and almost ready for the next step. Believe it, or not. We'll get there step by step."

"Yeah, getting shot on TV will make a luxury bathroom appear in your house."

"Jason, everyone was terrified for you. And, it was two bathrooms. Phil's crew came back to do it. It will be done by this weekend. I asked them about the Dark Lady, but they said they haven't seen her. Perhaps she's gone, now that justice is known. Everyone knew she was trying to save people, so they were no longer afraid of her."

He put his hands over her lower abdomen, "Are you sure you are alright?" He was relieved to feel that her abdomen felt firm. She wasn't showing, but he could feel the difference. It wasn't all for nothing, the baby and Kathy were fine.

She nodded, smiling. "I have been checked head to toe, little tike is none the worse for wear."

He leaned over and kissed her, and then winced. "Make love to me."

"No way! You were only released under my promise that you would get bed rest."

"You can have me in the bed." He smiled, teasing her, but the fact was that he was way too tired for that. He was already wanting to fall asleep.

She got up, "Sleep, let the morphine wear off. I am going downstairs to talk to your parents. Sarah and Mike are bringing dinner for us later." She kissed his forehead and left the room after tucking him in.

"Thanks Mom," he said flatly.

"Shall I get your cowboy p.j.s"

"Yield. I'll rest."

"If you are feeling better later, we can do something about those urges."

He smiled, nodded, and fell to sleep.

Over the next week everything was a blur. Both bathrooms were, thankfully, done. She could finally take a proper luxurious bath! Her parents could at least pee in the luxury they were used to. Jason was becoming stir-crazy, but so far the physical limitations kept him in check. He was napping now, after complaining about still getting tired easily, but ultimately he was feeling a bit better every day.

She enjoyed the last few minutes of her bath before getting out. She dried off, and put on a sun-dress. Her parents were arriving in two hours. They would be a bit stunned to see her in a dress. The last time they had seen her in one had been her prom.

She brushed her hair out, hoping her father didn't start badgering her, again, about not finishing her Master's Degree in Accounting. Honestly, it was all she could do to finish her Bachelors. The idea of signing up for more had been revolting. Then for some reason, she still did not fully understand, she hired into the police department. She could have gone on to finish up a law degree, but she didn't. What had prompted her to go into law enforcement? It was so far away from everything she knew.

Her father had been furious with her. Calling her education a '*stupid waste of money*.' She walked out that day, and bought her own apartment, thankfully before he cut her trust fund off. It didn't matter. She made her own money, and her career was her own. Her father couldn't control it. She went six months without speaking to him after that. Finally, her mother had called her. She talked her into coming to a party at their home. Her father tried to introduce her to a jerk. To keep the new found peace in the family, she had gone out with him twice. The second date he had grabbed her arm, and tried to jerk her around.

She smiled and thought of her brother-in-law, Mike, how would he put it if he were telling the story? '*I kicked his ass, but good.*'

The jerk left Kathy. Although Kathy had argued that having one's ass kicked out of a place, did not constitute one 'leaving'. The jerk also withdrew his sizable trust fund from her father's institution. Her father had been even more furious with her than he had been when she became a

police officer, because now she *'cost him even more money*. She had screamed at him, that she wasn't a punching bag for his snobby clients!

That was fifteen years ago, she had not spoken to him for more than ten minutes since then. In fact, neither of them had called her about their visit. It was their butler, Zachary who forwarded their *'itinerary'* for the *'trip'* to visit her. They would fly in, have a limo-service bring them to the house, and would stay in the guest room, if they deemed it comfortable enough.

She glanced in the guest room, and smiled with pride. It had been an easy renovation for her. It looked fabulous. Kathy had chosen items that looked like things the Caine's would have put in there, or more importantly, Dark Lady would have put there. Jason's mother had given her a purple quilt for the bed, but would make a replica of the one at the museum for her. The room was inviting and luxurious, no matter what era it was visited in. She had a poster made of a sketch artist's drawing of Dark Lady, based on Phil's description of her and Louise's family drawing. She had it framed and hung so it was the first thing one saw when entering. The lower half of the frame featured a brief of Dark Lady's story.

Between James, Sandy the curator, and the Mathews' family begging, Kathy had agreed to put the room on the Black History Month tour this season instead of next. This would help with the hit the town was taking on its small tourist business. Next year, she would start restoration on the attic for the following year's Black History Month.

She was now six chapters into her book, and already had a publisher for it. She planned to devote more time to it after Carrie was caught. They re-scheduled the reception until they could hold it without worry of Carrie showing up and doing her worst, which she had already demonstrated was pretty damn bad.

She held her dress tight against her abdomen. She would most certainly be visibly pregnant at the reception.

She smirked as she thought of her rocky relationship with her parents. "Dark Lady, my parents are coming to visit, please be patient with them," she said, just in case Dark Lady was still there. No books fell open with creepy messages. They had seen no sign of Dark Lady at all. "I hope you

can finally find peace." She looked at the portrait on the wall.

Jason's alarm went off. Kathy scrambled into their bedroom, and shut it off. "What was that doing on, at this time of day?"

"I wanted to make sure I had time to get ready for your parents to arrive," he said, sounding like he needed another hour of sleep, at least. She tried to convince him to rest, but he wouldn't have it, so she helped him get ready. It was a good thing he did get up when he did, because it took that long for him to get going.

"This is really getting old," he complained.

"You're getting better every day. Doc said six to eight weeks for the minimum. You have only been home a week."

"I would rather use the six to eight weeks leave when the baby is born."

"No whining," she said, helping him up. "And you know full well, it isn't using leave because it's in-line of duty. The paternity leave is entirely different."

He frowned and nodded. "I suppose. I just hate being down. I have never been down like this."

"I know, I wish there more I could do."

They went down to the living room. They had about ten minutes before her parents arrived.

"Which room should we put the baby in?" she asked, figuring that she would distract him by changing the subject to his favorite topic.

"The front room, like ours?" Jason shrugged.

Kathy leaned into him as she sat down. She smiled, "It was Percy Caine's room, so it is designed to be the room of the young master of house."

"I like the idea of a son."

"You like the idea of a baby you can be an awesome father to." She

kissed his cheek, trying not to lean in too hard.

"You seem stiff, I am not going to break if you kiss me, you know."

She smiled, and kissed him deeply, he winced. She backed off. "That is why I am stiff about it. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll live." He ran his hand up her thigh under her dress and kissed her cleavage, but again winced.

"We have guests coming. Maybe tonight, if you aren't hurting too bad, we can figure something out." She didn't want him to think she didn't want him physically. She missed his touch, but he was still weak.

He nodded, and sat up, wincing again, but trying to hide it. "You seem more nervous than I am about your parents coming."

She shrugged, "A bit. My father screamed at me in the phone about being barefoot and knocked up by a hick cop the minute I arrived here." She held up and wiggled her barefoot, and winking at Jason. "I should have taken some Southern drawl lessons from Mike. My dad would have a stroke right here."

"Mike does lay it on a bit thick." Jason smiled and nodded. "Ah, if your dad treats you like that in front of me, he won't have to worry about what Dark Lady does to him. I am capable, both mentally and physically, of driving him to the motel to stay, if he is going to be an ungrateful guest."

She hugged him around the neck, "Don't worry, I'll help you to the car, if it comes to that."

The ping-ping sound of the intercom to the gate interrupted them. Kathy jumped up and ran to the door. "Hello."

"Mr. and Mrs. Marconi," the driver's voice said.

Kathy opened the gate with the press of a button.

Jason took her hand and opened both of the front double doors smiling, "May as well make it a grand entrance. You have to admit, this house is impressive, and even as a ghost, Dark Lady has kept it well secured. With

the right family, it will be the best place to grow up." He patted her abdomen.

Kathy nodded, and took Jason by the waist, and they walked out onto the porch.

The black Lincoln pulled up the driveway and stopped in front of the porch. Kathy's mother jumped out immediately.

"Kathleen!" she said, running up the stairs. Kathy let go of Jason to accept her mother's embrace.

"Wow, Kathy your mother looks exactly like you." It was almost as if Jacqueline had Kathy cloned.

She let go of Kathy, "Jason, and hello. I saw you in the hospital when I came to search for Kathy. Did she tell you Mike had her phone, and we thought she was missing?"

He nodded, "That's why I am Chief, and Little Brother isn't."

She smiled, "I also saw you on all the news networks. My golf league was so impressed with the story of you saving my daughter."

He smiled. She was the polar opposite of Kathy, clone or not, Jacqueline kept the chatty gene for herself. "I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Marconi."

"Jackie, Please," she said, smiling. She turned back to the car. "Terry, are you coming?"

Terrance Marconi grudgingly got out of the car. He walked over and stood next to Jackie, without a word.

"This is Jason." Kathy was trying to keep her temper. "Jason, this is my father, Terrance."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Marconi." Jason said, offering a hand shake. Terry reluctantly and weakly took it, as if not wanting to touch Jason.

"Everyone who knows him calls him Terry," Jackie said smiling.

"That isn't entirely true," Terry said, frowning.

"Oh, Terrance, stop it, only your staff calls you Mr. Marconi. Jason is your son-in..."

"The dude who knocked up my daughter," Terry turned to Kathy. "Why are you making us stay at a hotel? I thought you said you had a house." His tone suggested disgust.

"With all due respect." Jason said, hoping he didn't upset Kathy. "This is *my* wife. This is *our* home. And, you will not address her in that tone. Unless of course, you really do want to stay in a hotel. There is a decent one downtown, if you insist. I am sure your driver can take you there, but be warned, it isn't a five star place."

Terry's expression lightened, "You live here?"

"Yes." Kathy said curtly, and then walked past him. "Sir, can you please help us with the luggage. My husband was severely injured, and I am afraid he will try to carry the luggage upstairs, by himself." She glanced hard at her father.

"Of course, Mrs. Rose." The driver unloaded the luggage, and Kathy directed him to the guest room.

"Thank you." Jason said, tipping the driver.

"No, I have it," Terry said handing the driver a fifty dollar bill. He went and sat in the living room. "You need new furniture."

Jason nodded to the driver, ignoring Terry for the moment.

"Thank you, sir." The driver tipped his hat, and took his leave.

"It's on the list...Dad." Kathy said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, Mom. I'll give you the tour."

Kathy and Jackie disappeared into the kitchen.

Jason sighed. He had just been abandoned by his wife, to sit with someone who did not want to be here, and had referred to him as *the dude*

who knocked up his daughter. He gingerly used the cane to walk over and sit down on the love seat. Terry was right, the furniture did not fit the room.

"I heard you blocked Kathy with your body, saved her from being shot."

Jason nodded, praying he didn't start talking bad about Kathy. He would hate to have to explain how his cane ended up in Terry's...the thought was cut off, with a sudden change in attitude.

"Thank you. I am eternally grateful."

"I love her. It was more important to me that she and the baby be safe than I live. To you I am the dude who knocked up your daughter, but to me, they are my life, my family. I would do anything for them."

"You know, I had a background check done on you."

Jason smirked. That was who had been checking up on him. He didn't blame Terry. He would most likely do the same to anyone coming around his son. "Am I the hick cop you thought?"

"You have a Master's degree in Public Administration. Why are you spinning your wheels here?"

"My family and friends are here. My wife has an awesome house here, even if it is half finished. Not only that, but her charitable foundation is based here. My child's cousins live here. I make plenty of money to live comfortably in this town of eight thousand people." Jason shrugged. "The weather only sucks, every four or five years. Why on earth would I want to leave?"

Terry smiled. "You are just like Kathy. That is what the report said, and that is what you just confirmed."

"I just wish she would have moved here sooner."

"Me too. I was so afraid of her working on the police department. I worried every day."

"You never told her." Jason was surprised. Kathy believed Terry had hated her career choice. He did, but not for the reasons she thought. "You

know she opens up, if you just ask a few well timed questions."

"No, I didn't want to upset her. That was why I tried to fix her up with the Carlson kid. If you have heard the story, she probably just called him the Grabby Jerk. I was hoping she would come home, and stop the police work. Secretly, though, I was really proud of her when she graduated the police academy."

Before Jason had the chance to debate whether or not to ask him if hooking her up with an abusive boyfriend was better than law enforcement, he spotted Kathy and Jackie.

"Dad!" Kathy said, entering the room with Jackie from the secret parlor stairs. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Kathy!" Jesus! You scared me!" Terry said, spinning around to face her, and a stunned Jackie.

Kathy ran across the room, and hugged Terry. "Daddy, I am so sorry. I thought you were disappointed in me. That was why I stayed away. I didn't want you to be disappointed."

"Well, I did think you deserved a higher paying job, but I followed your career very closely. You were a good detective. I was proud of the work you did. Proud of how you stepped out and took care of yourself, even though I found it maddening as Hell. Please don't cut us out of your life again."

"I won't, but you have to be nice to Jason. He is not the *dude who knocked me up*. He is my husband. Besides, he didn't do anything I didn't start..."

"Got it, don't need any further daughter's sex-life details." Terry made a face like he regretted making the comment and getting too much information in response to it. "And, I wouldn't dream of being mean to the man who made it possible to bring you back to us." Terry let go of Kathy, and walked over to Jason, embracing him carefully.

Jackie took Terry's arm. "You have to come see the guest room! Kathy you come too, tell your dad the story. And don't forget the book deal."

"Book deal?"

Kathy smiled and nodded as she took Jason by the waist. "Let's use the main staircase; the handrails are stronger, so Jason can come."

They toured the rest of the plantation and then settled down for the rest of the night, without incident from the Dark Lady.

She turned the light out, and snuggled in next to him. He smiled, it was good to be loved by someone who wasn't nuts.

In the morning, Kathy turned off Jason's alarm, so he wouldn't jolt awake, again. After last night he needed to rest. She also figured the smell of his favorite breakfast cooking would wake him up, gently. She breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that neither one of her parents ran screaming from the guest room during the night.

She turned on the news. There were no new updates on the hunt for Carrie Bell, but then it had been a month, and the media coverage was waning a bit. Mike or the Sheriff called or stopped by every day to update Jason on other matters, but Carrie Bell seemed to be gone. The Sheriff had even sent out a bayou search team in fan boats, who turned up nothing.

She smirked at the thought of Carrie in the bayou. She wouldn't last ten minutes before becoming the main course at a gator barbecue, or perhaps a gator Carrie-Gumbo competition.

"Something funny, Kitty-Kat?" Terry said, walking into the kitchen.

"You haven't called me Kitty-Kat since I was ten."

"Senior in high school." Terry corrected. "Your mother said you were getting too old to be called Kitty-Kat."

"I'll never be too old for that." She smiled. "Scrambled eggs, or would you like to try Jason's bacon pancakes?"

"Egg whites, please. Doctor's orders. He would hunt me down if he thought for one minute I ate bacon pancakes."

She looked at him concerned. "Doctor's orders? Since when?"

Although, since her father managed the doctor's accounts he probably really would hunt Terry down.

"Since my cholesterol went through the roof."

"Dad, you have a cook, who cooks fresh for you."

"The doctor says stress and genetics are playing a part." Terry sighed, "Look, Sweetheart, I have missed you. I thought you were never going to accept us back into your life. When you moved away, I was so sad. I thought we might never see you again. Then I hear from my secretary that you were nearly killed. She had seen it on CNN. No one even bothered to call us. Your mother was hysterical, since she was on the phone with you, but couldn't get back through to you. No one even told me you had a boyfriend. I heard everything second-hand."

"I called Mom about getting married, and the baby," Kathy ran over to him flinging her arms around him, "I stayed away, I felt so rejected; so unapproved of. Especially at her initial reaction about being barefoot and pregnant by a hick cop."

He held her tight. "No way. You will always be my maddening baby, Kitty Kat. But your Jason's problem now, Mrs. Rose." He patted her belly, "And if there is such a thing as Karma, this one will be just like you."

She laughed, as she broke away from him. "Egg whites it is, and if you don't mind there is fresh fruit in the fridge." She pointed.

Jackie came in a few minutes later. She chose the bacon pancakes.

Kathy was starting to wonder if she should peek in on Jason, when he wandered in looking very sleepy. "I thought I smelled breakfast. I must have forgotten to set my alarm." He sounded as tired as he looked.

"I can bring it up to you. Go back to bed."

He shook his head. "I need to get up. It's time to start testing some limits. Eating breakfast properly among them. For crying out loud, breakfast doesn't last that long. I can surely last that long."

Terry smiled, "Oh, yeah, two of kind, you two are."

Kathy smiled as she finished cooking, and set his plate down in front of him.

Jackie finished her orange juice. "You said you might need some help with the other rooms?" she asked looking hopeful. "Care for some shopping?"

Kathy smiled, and was about to accept, but then remembered, not only the guards', but Dark Lady's warning, not to leave the house. "There is a killer after me, one who has attacked me in public, and tried to snipe me in private. Jason was nearly killed. I need to give the police time to catch her. She even killed civilians to try to get to me. Let's make sketches, and do some measurements. That will get some of the ground work ready for the shopping."

Jason nodded in agreement. "I can't risk losing her. It's only for a little bit. Carrie can't run forever. By now, everyone in the U.S. knows what she looks like, since she shot everyone with the cameras rolling."

Jackie's eyes widened, "Yes, shooting a reporter in the head with a live feed to the newsroom will make your face internationally recognizable."

"Kathy, Jason, what about your wedding reception? You can't be prisoners in your own house," Terry said, concerned. "You can't go from one extreme to the next. I have guards to escort them. They could go into Baton Rouge. The driver is a retired Marine. No one follows him anywhere. At least get some new furniture that fits in the living room." Terry smiled, and then frowned. He pointed behind Kathy, "What the hell is that?"

"What?" Jackie asked. She didn't see anything. "What are you talking about? You aren't having a stroke, are you?"

"No, she is right there," Terry pointed. "She just swirled into existence, like a hurricane undoing itself." He twirled his finger around in a circle.

Kathy leaned over and looked at her father's pupils. She could see Dark Lady's reflection in them. "It's Dark Lady!"

Terry stared at Dark Lady. "You are very beautiful...She said ready the rifle. You can '*dispatch*' the Angry One from afar, and save one guard from

being covered in the red quilt." Terry stared at Dark Lady. "What does red quilt mean?"

"It means killed, she doesn't want them killed," Kathy said, jumping up, over turning her orange juice. She didn't bother to pick it up.

"Kathy! No!" Jason nearly yelled. "Let the guards..."

"Die. I don't think so! You said if anyone needed shooting from afar you would leave me to it. Well, someone needs shooting from afar. I am not going to any more funerals. One of those guards will be going home to his family, especially if I have anything to say about it." She ran all the way upstairs, and pulled out her rifle, and then headed over to the window, her mother in tow.

Jason gingerly got up to follow, but Terry motioned him to sit down. "Why don't we just call 911 and let them know what it is going on. Please just the basics, don't mention ghosts. I don't want them thinking I am nuts. I'll lose all my clients if they think I have gone around the bend."

Jason nodded and hobbled over to get his phone off the charger.

Kathy went over the rifle and press checked that it was properly loaded, and then looked out the window. It was too open. She needed to hide, where she could see, but not be seen. She ran through the library and up the stairs to the attic, and set up to scan the guards' area across the backyard toward the subdivision.

"Kathy! You aren't going to shoot someone, are you?" Jackie's voice was full of fear.

"If that psycho gets in my cross-hairs I am blowing her brains out. She tried to kill Jason, me, and the baby. She did kill friends, and innocent townspeople. My family won't be safe until she is either behind bars, or dead. Personally, I no longer care which." She didn't see anything. She knew there were also guards across the street, so she carried the rifle over to the front to look out into the edge of the bayou.

She shouldered the rifle and scanned the edge of the bayou from behind the shutter's edge. Had she been over there this whole time? Right across the street! She had to have been.

"Can you see anything? Do you want me to open the window" Jackie asked, sounding a bit whiny. She had never seen the law enforcement side of her daughter. It was scary, to watch her shoulder that rifle with the intent of taking someone out. The look on her daughter's face was one she had never seen before.

"No, she will see the open window and catch on to me. I hate to shoot through the old glass, but I need her out of the way. The glass is easier to replace than Jason is. I can't see anything yet. Some areas are too thick with vegetation. I don't want to take a shot, until I can take a clear one." She scanned the area with more desperation this time. Then she saw Carrie. "Found her. She looks like a bush-woman! That hair! It's matted with mud, and she is wearing a ballistic helmet. She is also wearing a military style ballistic vest; probably stolen from the gun shop car-jacking."

A text came through on Kathy's phone. "You don't get to keep it!"

She smiled and typed, "Its only bullet resistant, not bullet proof. You seem to have forgotten something very important. I am a sniper, and I can see you." She pressed send.

"What are you waiting for?" Jackie asked. She was scared of watching someone get shot, but terrified of what might happen if Kathy didn't shoot her.

"That," Kathy said, watching Carrie through the scope as she read the text. Carries eyes widened as she looked toward the house. She fired one round into the ground at Carrie's feet. "You text her with my phone, tell her to give up now, or I am blowing her brains out. One and only chance. Make it sound like it's from me."

Jackie did as she was told.

Carrie turned to run, but Kathy fired two rounds into her lower back. Carrie never read the text. She just lay there, screaming so loud that Kathy could hear her from inside the attic.

"Damn it! She moved, the rounds went low." She continued to watch through the scope.

The troopers and security guards came running over to Carrie, and handcuffed her behind her back.

She sighed loudly, "I am not going to get another shot. The guards are in the way now. Let's go downstairs."

Kathy and Jackie went downstairs, and out the front. Terry and Jason following, only much slower.

"Did you get her?" Jason said, cursing under his breath that he couldn't keep up. "Let's just take the Jeep. It's right there." He grabbed the keys hanging by the door.

"Yes," Kathy said returning. "Give me those." She took the keys. She and Terry helped Jason to the Jeep. She drove across the street. Sirens were coming from every direction in the distance.

Carrie was moaning and crying, "You shot me! I can't feel my legs."

"Bitch! You shot my husband. You're lucky I missed! I was aiming to give you a Remington face lift. But I'll settle for paralysis. That should make life fun in the prison yard."

Jackie leaned over Carrie, "Looks like she does get to keep it! If you had asked me, I would have warned you that somehow Kathy always comes out on top. She is too much like her father."

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Two months later Kathy's parents were back down for the Friday Fish Fry reception.

Their wedding table had attracted the highest attendance since the 1976 Bicentennial celebration. They offered congratulations, and of course wanted to know about the case. The wedding was good business for the foundation. They raised an additional two hundred and fifty-two thousand dollars from the media exposure alone, and Kathy's parent's donated one million dollars to it.

Jason was happy to be going back to work on Monday. He smiled at Kathy, knowing the tight smile on her face was one that suggested she was sick of being patted on the belly. "Come on, let's dance."

"I am not even that big yet. Only sixteen weeks." She complained. Then she offered a more genuine smile, before turning serious, "I am sorry I brought all this on you. You didn't deserve any of this."

He smiled back at her. "Are you kidding? I get the girl. I get the family. I get to live in the mansion, with luxury all around me. I am the one who got to keep it all. Thank you for marrying me, and being my best friend." He kissed her and held her tightly by the waste. A clapping and cheering went through the crowd.

He smiled, keeping his attention on her. "Carrie's attorney indicated she was going to take a life in prison deal, in exchange for not seeking the death penalty, but it will be another two months at least before she is released from the hospital. They said her spinal cord was completely severed by the bullet."

"Good, so the Bell situation is finally over and we can start our life." She leaned her head on his shoulder and gently swayed with him.

"Tired?"

She nodded, "Just a worn out city girl."

## EPILOGUE

Nearly six years later, Daniel Rose used his mother's office chair to reach the top shelf of the bookcase behind her desk. Today was the first day of school, and he needed to find something. He thought, for sure, it was here in the library.

"Child, what are you doing?" A gentle voice came from behind him.

"I can't find a book. I think it's called *Handwriting for Little Hands*." He was getting frustrated. He had searched everywhere.

"*Handwriting for Young Hands*? A special man came and took it away, before you were born."

"Then why do I remember it being important?" He propped his hands on hips.

"It was once, but not anymore."

"Granny, I need to find it!" He climbed down out of the chair, and turning to face Dark Lady. "Can he bring it back?"

"I love you dearly, young Master Rose, but I am no longer Granny. How can you remember that?"

He shrugged, and fiddled with the Shakespeare Reader. "Was I around before?"

"Before what?"

He shrugged again, pulling the book strap tighter.

"Here, let me put these away for you. I am sure there will be up dated books for you to learn from. Meanwhile, your mother hid a treat in the bottom drawer of the side table in the downstairs foyer. I am sure you will find it much more interesting than these dusty old things."

"Really, Thank you Granny," he said, stepping away from his little stack of old books.

"You are welcome child, and you can let that treat serve to remind you that you have a perfectly good like to live as Daniel Alan Rose. There is no need to hang on to that which cannot be relived. I can no longer be Granny to anyone, my Stable Boy is gone. You are a whole new person. Go on now, scat, before I change mind and help your mother hide it."

He nodded, ran down the stairs and dug in the side table drawer, pulling out a flyer for Fall Pee wee football. His eyes widened. Sign up was the first day of school...Today!

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" He clutched the flyer, and ran up the stairs to his parent's room.

Dad was zipping Mom's dress up for her. "Whatcha got, Dan?" he asked.

"Football! Can I sign up! Please!" he ran all the way to his father and jumped into his arms, waving the flyer around wildly. "You look very pretty Mom."

"Whoa, you are getting big," Dad said, spinning him around. "What do you think, Mom?"

"I think, I should have hidden it better." She smiled, but her hands were placed tightly on her hips.

"Please Momma! Can I sign up!" He let go of Dad's neck, and reached for her. She took him. Even when disappointed, she had never refused him when he reached for her. And, calling her '*momma*' was better than using '*please*' and '*thank you*.' Otherwise, he usually called her Mom. His parents' love and devotion for him was unquestioned.

"You are getting too heavy for me." She let him slide to the floor, and again, accepted his embrace around her waist.

"Please. You can sit with the other mommas and cheer for me. I might even find some pom-poms for you." He could feel her sigh. She wasn't the cheerleader type, unless of course, it involved him. He was the sole exception to her taking up cheering.

"I can cheer too," Dad said, leaning over and kissing Mom's cheek.

He smiled, Mom was helpless if he and Dad worked together. She would let him play. It was good to have parents that didn't die this time. It was getting harder to remember *last time* as he called it.

"I suppose we can sign up, and do some shopping for equipment after school today," she said, patting his back.

"Yay! Thank You!" he said, squeezing her tighter around the waist.

She smiled and patted his head, "Well, you're a little clone of your father, why wouldn't you play football?"

"Come on, let's go down, eat, and get you to school," Dad said, picking him up and carrying him down the stairs.

"Bacon pancakes, Dad!" he smiled, and then let his life Daniel Alan Rose become that much more cemented, and any other memor...fantasies fade away. It was good to be Daniel Rose. His life was easy, and his parent adored him.

"You know it."

Dark Lady smiled, before fading away for the last time. No one needed her here. She could rest now.

## AFTERWARD

I hope you enjoyed the Caine Plantation.

If any of my readers know people who work in emergency services they may find that many of them have worked in the '*business*' for generations. In my own family I am the fifth generation to work in some sort of emergency services, mostly law enforcement, with two fire fighters in one generation, (It skipped a generation in my family). When I went into police work I would talk with some of the other '*generational*' officers. One officer I worked with, in the south, told me about a case his great grandfather had worked. As we do today, they had gang issues back in the day. It was suspected but never proven that there was a gang of runaway slave hunters who didn't return the slaves back to their masters. They would seal them in crates and whiskey barrels and ship them to island plantations via pirates; or so they believed.

His great grandfather was never able to prove anything against this gang. As with most crimes that police suspect, but cannot prove the victim's voice goes completely unheard except by officers at roll call (many officers call them ghosts). I have no doubts that this happened to someone at some point in time, which is one of the reasons I used this hand-me-down story as inspiration for the Caine Plantation. (There was still liberal use of literary license.)

The house that smelled like a homicide! It's true! I once refused to put in an offer on a house because the smell inside the house reminded me of a homicide investigation I had assisted on. (Fresh baked bread, in this case.) The two bludgeoning's Kathy mentions are also a mix-matching of several that I took reports on. Her observations are based in my experience as an officer, not statistics about bludgeoning's.

It is also true!!! A child would call the police to report that "A Dark Lady was crying" in his closet. The ghost is completely based on this call. Her description, her mannerisms...the last time he called in it was regarding her yelling at him for taking money out of his mother's purse. He showed us that he put it back, and asked us to make Dark Lady leave. It wasn't long after that, that I retired, so I do not know whatever became of him.

Before anyone gets any wild ideas about why I retired from law enforcement; the reason Kathy retired was made up. I wanted to stick with the overall tone of the book. And, I know, I wimped out on her dialogue when she was talking to Jason, but I am a real retired police officer...it is



important that I am able to answer NO to certain questions, that may or may never be asked of me. I do beg your pardon on that front. (I'll say *Mark Furhman* and let you google it. Hopefully you will understand and forgive me.)

The ridiculous price on the house. The Dale Mansion in Nashville, Tennessee. The city couldn't give it away when Kroger moved in. I believe (eventually) the winning bid was \$100. This also where the "caves" argument came in. I could never find any caves here, only a tiny sink hole; but heaven forbid I 'dis' the cave! The locals are very protective of that myth.

As I wrote earlier, this is a made up work, with liberal use of literary license, but I was inspired by some of the bravery it took for both the runaways and the people who helped them. Even though there are many myths, not all of them are false. As I said through Kathy-They had to use something; and why not quilts. It tells the story beautifully, and the quilts (used or not) keep history alive in our minds. And-that is a truth worth pursuing.

BONUS MATERIAL! The number one excuse that will 'woo' an officer out of writing you a ticket...Shake head at self, "I am sorry officer, I was just headed home." It will not work all the time, but it will most of the time. I polled some of the hardest traffic officers I worked with, and even they said this was the best one. Don't tell them you know this, or it will stop working, Shhhhhhhh.

COMING NEXT YEAR:

“THE GREAT LOSING,  
THE MAD DRAGON KING”

Timothy Makani thought he was destined to be the most forgotten boy who ever lived. Little did he know that a ‘forgottenness’ spell had been cast on him so those who sought to kill him couldn’t remember where to find him. It was the only reason he was alive now, but soon the forces who sought would remember to find him. If he is lucky he will find safety before the Mad Dragon King finds him. The only problem is that he can remember that anyone is hunting him, or that only he can save his home village.

Can he rise to his destiny, and free the land of the Mad Dragon King's tyranny.









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San Bernardino, CA  
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After growing tired of the internal politics, Kathy Marconi left her career as a homicide detective in New York City. She flippantly places, and wins a bid on an old sugar cane plantation in the Deep South. Upon her arrival, she immediately discovers the house has secrets, centuries of them.

Her life becomes even more complicated when the local police chief asks her to assist in the most grisly homicide the small town has seen. The case has chilling similarities to a slave murdered in 1846 by her Master, including the same weapon. Someone, or something, is recreating Mary's murder.

At first glance the plantation seems to be the first stop on the Underground Railroad out of the Deep South, but was it a safe haven or a railroad to Hell? The more Kathy digs into the Caine history, the more terror she uncovers, both past and present.

